

Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947

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Foreword

The Indian Council of Historical Research was presented with a request from the Minister for Education and Social Welfare, which he had received in 1972 from Shri Raj Bahadur, then Union Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, and Shri K.C. Pant, then Union Minister for Home Affairs, for bringing out a series of books on the role of the central and state legislatures during our freedom struggle to mark the 25th Anniversary in 1972 of India's attainment of independence.

The Council gladly accepted this assignment, and Professor Manoranjan Jha's work on *Role of the Central Legislatures in the Freedom Struggle* and Dr Amit Kumar Gupta's book on *North West Frontier Province Legislature and Freedom Struggle 1932-47* have already been published as a result of its efforts. The third book to come out in this series is the present work on Assam Legislature by Professor Amalendu Guha, Professor of Economic History at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. The book has been written in consultation with an Editorial Board for the entire project, under the chairmanship of Professor S. Gopal, but like all other authors in this project Dr Guha has been given complete academic freedom to express views based on his research.

Professor Guha has not only presented a detailed account of the evolution of the Provincial Legislature of Assam in the context of general political developments in the Province, but has also provided valuable background for an understanding of the colonial

socio-economic structure. He has discussed the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it, and marked shifts within the national movement in economic objectives and political ideas, particularly in the context of peasant, and labour problems. Thus, the book, which is based on massive research, may be read as an authentic record of the role of Assam in the development of the Indian national movement, with a focus not restricted only to the leading party in the national movement, but also embracing other trends and elements, all of which together struggled in their own ways for liberation from colonialism.

The author has utilised the broadest possible range of sources in the relevant regional languages in local archives and private collections, and given a very full bibliography of published literature. Also of note is his use of quantitative data and statistics in elucidating the role of colonialism in stultifying the development of society and economy in northeast India, as well as the role of anti-colonial elements in endeavouring to break through the colonial strangle-hold.

1977 is the centenary year of the birth of Tarunram Phookan, a leading nationalist of old Assam. Like Chittaranjan Das in Bengal, he mobilised the middle class of Assam to combat imperial authority both within the legislature and outside it. It is fitting that this volume, which recounts the nature of the broader mobilisation that followed, should be published in this year.

I thank the author and all those who assisted him in completing the work, as well as the members of the Editorial Board for scrutinising the manuscript of this book in detail and Professor Syed Nurul Hasan, the Education Minister, for sponsoring this project.

R. S. Sharma

Chairman

Indian Council of Historical Research

Prologue

This book on Assam—i.e. present Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram—comes alphabetically first in a series in which the role of legislatures in the history of the freedom struggle and political change in the eleven Provinces of British India will be examined. I have stretched the period a little backward to begin from 1826, the year of British annexation of Assam, and have carried the analysis to 1950. The Frontier Tracts (present Arunachal) and the State of Manipur, which had some links with Assam, are however outside the scope of this study.

Historiography of modern Assam, as it stands today, practically stops at 1858. E.A. Gait, for example, devotes less than forty of the four hundred and odd pages of his book—a lucid work in the tradition of imperialist historiography—to the post-1858 period. He stops short of the Non-cooperation era even in its second edition that was brought out in 1926. K. N. Dutt's *Landmarks of the Freedom Movement in Assam* is but a bare 136-page outline, useful but inadequately documented. No other publication on the subject deserves mention here. Assam is one of those provinces where even an officially sponsored history of the local freedom movement has yet to come out. This lag therefore has forced me to look also for the wood so that I may not miss the trees. Chronicling has received no less importance in this study than analysis, particularly while dealing with the last phase of the freedom struggle.

My chief task has been to build the narrative chronologically for the century and a quarter under review and, at the same time, to treat it thematically as well. In the resultant periodisation, four distinct periods have emerged. Three chapters, one each, cover the first three periods—the years 1826-73, 1874-1905 and 1906-1920. The major task in these chapters has been to provide the background for an understanding of the colonial socio-economic structure that was shaken in the political turmoil of the Gandhi epoch to follow. In the remaining five chapters, covering this last period of about three decades, the emphasis has somewhat shifted from society and economy to the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it. The shifts within the national movement in political ideals and economic objectives, particularly in the context of the peasant and labour problems, have not been lost sight of.

The main focus, after 1905, has been on all political activities, centering round or opposed to the legislature that existed for the province. Hence, in my choice of source materials, over fifty thousand printed pages of relevant legislative debates and interpellations have been more important than unpublished government records for the same period. These have, of course, been supplemented by other usual primary and secondary sources. Proceedings of legislatures have one advantage that they carry not only the official but also the other versions of the events on record. Though not fortunate enough in my search for local private papers, I was nevertheless able to unearth a bundle of such papers labelled “leaders’ correspondence” in the APCC archives of the Congress Bhavan, Gauhati. I have amply used this material to make up for the dearth of official records for the decade 1937-47 to which it relates.

Individual freedom fighters or legislators, not receiving adequate coverage in this book, were not necessarily persons with a marginal role in the history of the period under review. This only means that either the necessary information was not available or the relevant micro-details were not found necessary for answering the questions raised.

Writing about this pre-independence decade has been the most difficult, yet exciting part of my task. Many of the actors and witnesses of this stormy phase of our history are still present amidst us, with all their sensitivities to what concerns them. This makes the use of a range of relevant materials for this study all the more difficult. Despite this limitation, I have not been shy of devoting as much

as one-third of the space of this book to this decade. I am nevertheless aware that, for a proper assessment of the events of this decade, more research will have to be conducted at the grass roots level. Mine is a spade work in anticipation of future research.

Errors of fact or interpretation, if any, remain mine alone.

Amalendu Guha

Acknowledgement

I am honoured that the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, which commissioned me for this study has accepted it for publication. For financial support during the three and a half years I worked on the book, I have a debt of gratitude both to the Indian Council of Historical Research as well as to the Centre for studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, I joined in November 1973. For promoting my release and for facilitating my taking up of the new assignment, my thanks are due to the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona.

I am grateful to Arvind N. Das, currently of the National Labour Institute, New Delhi and Manorama Sharma, of the Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, for the research assistance they provided, each for six months, for collecting, arranging and even assimilating the materials. Thanks are due for their ungrudging help in the matter of access to some materials to Pabitrakumar Deka, A. C. Bhuyan and Homen Bargohain of Gauhati; and to Arun Ghosh, Kulanath Gogoi, Govindalal Ray and Anuradha Chanda of Calcutta. I take this opportunity also to thank my wife, Anima Guha, for sharing with me some of the stresses and strains that the writing of this book involved. The Cartography Section of my Centre is to be collectively thanked for preparing the map accompanying this book.

My friends and colleagues, S. K. Chaube, Amales Tripathi, Safiq Naqvi, M.S. Prabhakar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Bipan Chandra and Barun De read and commented on portions of the manuscript.

Their scrutiny helped me avoid certain errors of judgment and style at the stage of revision. Barun and Bipan influenced considerably the rewriting of my final chapters, through their seminal ideas on some important aspects of Indian nationalism. For editorial help at the final stage, I am indebted to A. K. Gupta and N. C. Chatterjee of the Indian Council of Historical Research. My thanks go to my countless friends on the staff of various libraries at Poona, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Shillong, Gauhati and Tezpur I visited in course of my work. My thanks also go to Sudhamay Sengupta, R. Girija and Gouri Banerjee who typed the manuscript.

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A Note on Spelling

In matters of transliteration and the spelling of proper names, absolute consistency has not been aimed at. Anglicised spellings of several surnames (e.g., Barua, Borooah, Baruah, Barooah; Bardaloi, Bardoloi; Phookan, Phukan etc.) are varied in usage; such spellings in a person's name often underwent changes even within his or her own life-time. Hence, what has been attempted in this book is only to maintain the same spelling of a proper name all through, except in quotes.

In the matter of transliteration from Indian languages, all borrowed English words (e.g., 'Congress') have been retained in their original form, and a simplified system of transliteration has been improvised to avoid diacritical marks.

Abbreviations

ACOER	Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (1925)
Ad. Rep.	Administration Report (Annual)
AICC	All India Congress Committee
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
ALAP	Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings
ALCP	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings
ALECR	Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22
AOC	Assam Oil Company Limited
APCC	Assam Pradesh (Provincial) Congress Committee
APTUC	Assam Provincial Trade Union Congress
AS	Assam Secretariat Files (at Assam State Archives, Shillong; now shifted to Gauhati)
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPI	Communist Party of India
DCC	District Congress Committee
DIR	Defence of India Rules
DPI	Director of Public Instruction
DHAS	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (Govt. of Assam, Gauhati)
EBALCP	Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council Proceedings

Abbreviation

GI	Government of India
IAR	<i>Indian Annual Register</i>
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IESHR	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
ILCP	Imperial (Indian) Legislative Council Proceedings
Imp. Gaz.	<i>Imperial Gazetteer of India</i>
INA	Indian National Army
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
IPC	Indian Penal Code
ITA	Indian Tea Association
K.W.	Keep with (Certain confidential Home Dept. files were so marked).
L.S.G.	Local Self Government
M.L.C.	Member, Legislative Council
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
NNC	Naga National Council
OEHFM	Office of the Editor of the History of Freedom Movement, Govt. of Assam.
Pol. Proc.	Political Proceedings
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RIAF	Royal Indian Air Force
RIN	Royal Indian Navy
RPC	Rajendra Prasad Collection
RTC	Round Table Conference
T. E.	Tea Estate

Under the Umbrella of the Bengal Presidency—1826-1873

BRITISH CONQUEST OF NORTH EAST INDIA

It was since the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal that the East India Company came into direct contact with the medieval kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam as well as the tribal communities of their adjoining hills. These sparsely-populated territories did not yet have enough economic worth or surplus revenue-yielding potentiality to attract the attention of British annexationists. They had therefore been left undisturbed, until the Burmese invasion (1817-24) of Assam and the Cachar plains brought an end to this policy of indifference. In November 1823 David Scott, the magistrate of Rangpur and Civil Commissioner for the district of Goalpara and Garo Hills (formed in 1822), was also appointed Agent to the Governor-General on the Northeast Frontier of Bengal. "We have not come (here) to quench our thirst for the conquest of your kingdom", proclaimed a manifesto published in Bengali on behalf of the interventionist British-Indian troops, "but to destroy our enemies, interested as we are to protect ourselves".¹ The Burmese were finally forced to surrender their claim over Assam under the Treaty of Yandabo, 1826.

During the following decade and a half, the kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam, along with their dependencies, and all the petty, independent tribal states of the Khasi Hills were annexed. Further annexation of the remaining hills was subsequently completed step by step in the face of stiff tribal resistance. The North

1. Quote from *Samachar Darpan* (In Bengali, Serampore), 17 April 1824; translation ours.

Cachar Hills were organised into a separate administrative unit, after their subjugation was completed by 1854. A part of the Naga Hills was annexed in 1866; the country of the Lhota Nagas, in 1875; of the Angami Nagas, in 1878-80; and of the Ao Nagas, in 1889. The Garo Hills, long under loose political control, was made a separate district in 1869; but the Garos could not be brought under full control until 1873. The Lushais (Mizo) were brought under control during the years 1871-89, but the formation of the Lushai Hills district took place only in 1898. The boundaries of the British power in Northeast India were in fact always moving, always in a flux, right upto its last days in India.² Nevertheless, the British province, that came to be known as Assam, took shape more or less by 1873.

The Raj appeared on the scene in the guise of saviours of the people suffering from a situation of chaos, lawlessness and oppression that had persisted since the 1770s, starting with the Moamaria Civil War and culminating in the Burmese occupation of the Assam plains (1817-1824). But it soon dawned on the people that the Raj had come to stay. Its purpose was to turn Assam into an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britons and to transform local traditional institutions in such manner as to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation. People found out from experience that the new masters' immediate concern was the extortion of land-revenue even to the detriment of the welfare of their subjects. After assuming the charge of Assam from his predecessor in 1832, Robertson found "...its inhabitants emigrating, its villages decaying and its revenue annually declining". The Court of Directors were grieved to learn that "a dreadful extortion had begarred the ryots and rendered a large portion of Assam waste in which up to our conquest such a thing as jungle was hardly to be seen".³

2. For details of annexations, E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (2nd edn., Calcutta/Simla, 1926)—Chapters XIV and XV; S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826* (Gauhati, 1949); R. M. Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam : 1824-54* (Calcutta, 1954); H. Barch, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* (Shillong, 1967); P. C. Kar, *British Annexation of Garo Hills* (Calcutta, 1970); N. K. Barooah, *David Scott in North-East India: A Study in British Paternalism* (New Delhi, 1970).
3. Quotes are respectively from *Political Proceedings*, 23 July 1832, No. 90 and the letter from the Court of Directors, No. 14 of 1834, both cited by Lahiri, n. 2, pp. 225 and 235.

PEOPLES' RESISTANCE TO THE CONQUERORS

The Early Phase of Resistance

The old aristocracy that had lost its offices of profit was the first to react violently to the alien rule. The rebellions of Gomdhar Konwar and Rupchand Konwar in 1828 and 1829, respectively, were but attempts at a palace revolution by pretenders to the throne. These were quickly suppressed. For his role in the 1829 rebellion, Peali Barphukan was executed. The Singphos, a tribe on the Burma border, too, raised the banner of revolt during the years 1830-31. They were in touch with the organisers of the first rebellion and with the Khasi resistance leaders. However, it was the British ban on their slave-hunting operations in Assamese territory that had actually led them into this infructuous revolt. The Khasi War of Independence (1829-33), led by U. Tirot Singh at the head of an alliance of the petty Khasi republics, was on the other hand, a protracted resistance movement of the entire people, employing guerilla tactics of warfare. Together with their people, the Khasi chiefs fought valiantly against the British, but had ultimately to surrender before superior arms.⁴

Captain A. White visited the Khasi country in connection with settling some succession dispute there in 1826. He was much impressed when he witnessed how the Khasi tribal democracy functioned. He had then seen an assembly of three to four hundred people in session, who "were entitled to vote on the question". While narrating this experience three years later, he wrote: "... their debates were conducted with much spirit and animation for 2 days and with an order, decorum and apparent courtesy which I have not seen surpassed in any European Society". Even as the hostilities started, White recognised in the Khasis

"a people likely to show the same stubborn independence and hatred of foreign domination ...which the character of their Government was calculated to foster, being apparently founded on an extensive popular basis, the power of the Rajah being apparently checked by an aristocracy of a widely extended nature bordering upon democracy".⁵

4. Lahiri, n. 2, chapter III, particularly pp. 59-60. Also Gait, n. 2, pp. 301-3 and 324.
5. White to Swinton, Gauhati, 24 April 1829, *Foreign Secret*, 8 May, No. 11-12 (NAI).

National Revolt of 1857: Its Impact

The great national upheaval of 1857 also did not leave Assam untouched. Wild rumours that the end of the British rule in India was imminent spread all over the province. The Hindustani sepoy stationed at Dibrugarh and Gauhati as well as some members of the deposed local aristocracy became restive towards the close of July 1857. Contacts were established between soldiers' barracks and the followers of the Charing Raja who aspired for restoration. This was done through the efforts of Maniram Dewan (1806-58), then camping in Calcutta, and his associate Madhu Mullick, a Bengali Mukhtear. A plan was agreed upon, and preparations for the uprising went on secretly. Planters and missionaries became panicky; many of them left their posts to take shelter at Gauhati. Marwari traders and moneylenders buried their properties in apprehension of trouble. The Commissioner of Assam, in his despatch of 29 August 1857, asked the Bengal Government to send a European force "to save the province from the (impending) revolution".⁶ Because of the loyalty of the Gurkha and local tribal sepoy of the Assam Light Infantry, the apprehensions were however belied. Large-scale arrests were nevertheless made. Many sepoy were court-martialled for mutiny and no less than twenty one civilians were tried and punished for treason. Maniram Dewan and Peali Barua were given death sentences. Madhu Mullick, Bahadur Gaonburha and several others were sentenced to transportation for life or long jail terms. Thus ended the attempt to dislodge the British from power in Assam. With the arrival of three 100-strong units of a British naval brigade from Calcutta, the situation further eased, much to the relief of the local administration and planters.

There could be no doubt about the national character of the attempted uprising. The persons accused of treason belonged to diverse social and ethnic groups. Yet they were able to unite together with the common objective of driving out the alien intruder and also of reducing the burden of taxation. The leader of the plot, Maniram Dewan, was a man of ability and vision. His well-argued critique of the British rule, submitted to the authorities in the early fifties, remains a remarkable political document. The bias of the leaders of the revolt was no doubt basically pro-feudal. Yet it was not altogether without a popular support. There is evidence that the

6. Cited in H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-1858* (Gauhati, 1963), p. 169; see also *ibid*, pp. 163-79. Gait, n. 2, pp. 326-8.

workers of the Assam Company—all Assamese villagers working under contractors—struck work to fraternise with the rebels. This is evident from observations made by the planters at the time. On the arrival of the naval brigade at Sibsagar, a reception was given to them by the local planters. The Calcutta Board of Directors of the Assam Company, in this connection, reported on 2 March 1858 as follows:

“...whilst our private servants were cheerfully obedient to our co-operative proceedings with Government in the maintenance of order, the independent contractors for cultivating our lands, *the indigenous inhabitants of the neighbouring villages held off from the performance of their contracts* on the plea that they were not to be paid, believing that the Europeans ‘were to be cut up’; so far from aiding Government in suppressing revolt, they remained utterly passive, many sympathising with their conspiring Rajah and the disaffected Seepoys. *Had an outbreak occurred, there can be little doubt that they would have sided with the rebels*”. (emphasis ours).

The planters might have exaggerated their distrust of the natives. But the fact remains that the contractors and their labour gangs struck work and non-cooperated with Europeans in the maintenance of order at the crucial hour. Madhuras Koch, who was the leader of this labour strike, was sentenced to seven years’ rigorous imprisonment on 30 January 1858.⁷ A few months after the suppression of the revolt, when stories of assaults on respectable persons, the slaughtering of their cattle, arson and such other incidental outrages committed by British sailors of the naval brigade at Dibrugarh were reported in the press, a correspondent wrote to the editor of the *Hindoo Patriot* on 25 September 1858:

“It appears from their manners and expressions that they, as if instruments of torture and cruelty, are employed to bend the unbroken spirits of a newly acquired territory to the yoke of subjection”.⁸

7. Quote from an extract in H. A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 96. For information on Madhuras, see B. Sharma, *The Rebellion of 1857 vis-a-vis Assam* (Gauhati, 1957), pp. 40 and 75; also by the same author, *Maniram Dewan* (In Assamese, Gauhati 1950), pp. 185-6.
8. *Hindoo Patriot* (Calcutta), 21 October 1858.

Peasant Struggles of a New Type

Two other uprisings of a local nature took place in the early sixties—one in the Jaintia Hills and the other in the plains of Nowgong—in the wake of a series of new taxation measures.

In the Jaintia Hills, people were not accustomed to pay any kind of money-tax in the past. When a house tax and the stamp duty were introduced in 1860, they rose in open rebellion. The revolt was put down with an iron hand; but people lay low for the time-being only. A fresh levy of the new Income Tax of 1860—insignificant though it was in its incidence locally—made the people apprehensive of further imposts. The introduction of the Licence Tax in January 1862 and attempts at confiscation of even ceremonial weapons of the people by a brutalised police force finally led to a more serious outburst of revolt in the same month. Led by their traditional chiefs, the Khasi people of the Jaintia Hills stood as one man. Two Sikh regiments and an elephant battery were moved into the hills, but the people “though armed with bows and arrows, fought bravely for their independence”.⁹ They did not surrender until November 1863.

The increase in land-revenue on the dry crop lands in 1861 was much resented to in Nowgong as in the three other affected districts. However, it was the 1860 ban on poppy cultivation that affected the peasant economy of Nowgong most, for it was the largest opium-producing district of Assam. The Income Tax Act, as amended in 1861, in fact did not touch a single agriculturist in Assam. Nevertheless, because of an information gap, it created misapprehensions about the Government's intentions. People knew that in the adjoining Jaintia Hills, peasants had already fought with arms against unfair taxes. At this juncture, the Bengal Government called upon its officers in Assam to report on the feasibility of a tax on betel-nut and *pan* cultivation. This led to an agitation in Nowgong, mainly in Phulaguri area inhabited by tribal people (Lalung).

In September 1861, some 1500 peasants marched to the district town. They demonstrated peacefully before the magistrate and presented a petition to him. It referred to the harm that had already been done to them by prohibiting poppy cultivation. It was prayed that no further taxes be levied on their betel-nut and *pan* gardens. The district magistrate treated the demonstrators casually and was

9. Gait, n. 2, pp. 328-9 for the quote and Barch, n. 2, pp. 173 and 177. Also H. K. Barpujari, “Facts behind the Jaintia rebellion 1862-64”, *Journal of Indian History*, 51—Part I (April 1973), pp. 141-8.

callous to their grievances. It was established through an official enquiry later that the said magistrate used to deal with ryots always in a highhanded and provocative manner and did not allow them even to enter his office compound.¹⁰ They were even fined on several occasions for allegedly making noise within the court compound.

A *raij mel* (peoples' assembly) was thereupon held at Phulaguri in October. The assembly was scheduled to be in session for five days to ensure participation of men even from distant villages. Approximately, one thousand people assembled by 15 October. Five to six hundred people in that assembly were armed with lathis. A police party that had come to disperse it on that day was driven out, save one taken into custody by the people. By 17 October three to four thousand people assembled there. The police made yet another attempt to break up the assembly and arrested some of its leaders the same day. But after all of them having been forcibly rescued by the people, the police left the spot. Next day, a European officer, Lieutenant Singer, came with a police party and met the leading members of the assembly. They all reiterated—through a spokesman named Jati Kalita—their complaints about the ban on opium cultivation and their apprehensions about the income and *pan* taxes. They further added that, as the district magistrate had not attended to their grievances, they were contemplating in the *mel* as to the means of carrying their complaints before the higher authorities. Singer ordered them to disperse and tried to seize their bamboo lathis. He got himself inadvertently killed in this scuffle. The police force accompanying him fled in panic.

The news of Singer's death, accompanied by rumours of an intended attack on the town, reached Nowgong the same evening. The panicky district magistrate entrenched himself at the Treasury and sent a small armed force to the trouble spot. Their firing on the crowd led to several deaths. By 23 October all was quiet again with the arrival of fresh military forces from Tezpur and Gauhati. Narsingh Lalung and eight other peasant leaders, mostly tribals, were punished with long-term imprisonment or transportation. This episode of the people's heroic resistance to the increasing tax

10. This account is based on *The Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1861-62, pp. 65-67; the evidence of J. J. S. Driberg, Commissioner of Excise in Assam in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Opium*, 1893, Vol. 2, (London, 1894), pp. 300-1 and "Papers on Phulaguri Ryots", No. 891, Fort William, 31 May 1862 from Secy. to the Govt. of Bengal to Off. Commissioner of Assam, given as an appendix therein, pp. 459-60.

burden and bureaucratic mindlessness is still very much alive in folk memory as the "Phulaguri Dhawa". From this time onwards, the traditional popular institution of the *raij mel* was increasingly resorted to by the Assamese people for resisting the enhancement of land-revenue that took place periodically. The Phulaguri Dhawa was villified by colonial scribes as an uprising against the ban as such on poppy cultivation. (see Census of India, *Assam* Vol. I, 1891, page 231). But the available evidence reveals that such characterisation was a deliberate distortion of history. The Secretary to the Government of Bengal concluded that "the infliction of numerous fines on the people for their importunity in urging their grievances" on the district magistrate's attention was a major cause of the revolt. The tactless district magistrate was subsequently demoted to a lower rank, under the Lieutenant-Governor's orders.¹¹

To sum up, the Assamese peasantry, unlike the Khasis, reacted to the new regime at first with mixed feelings. After half-a-century of chronic political chaos, the British measures at restoration of law and order appeared to them as a welcome phenomenon. But soon they began to feel the increasing strains of the progressive enhancement of land revenue and other taxes. The accompanying monetisation process that was suddenly enforced was also somewhat disastrous in its initial impact. The new masters ceased to collect taxes in kind or in the form of labour-rent which had been the erstwhile practice. In the given transitional situation of a deficient currency supply and extremely limited facilities of marketing farm products, this policy caused hardship and resentment. For, peasants failed to secure enough cash to pay their land tax. In the interiormost areas, even around 1850, peasants had to walk up long distances of two to three days' march to get their goods converted into cash.¹² Such a

11. Same as n. 10 and K. N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Gauhati, 1958), p. 26.

See *Arunoday* (In Assamese, Sibsagar), 14 (Nov. 1861) for a comment by N. L. Farwell, condemning the uprising as futile adventurism. (We have used a later version of the spelling of the name of the journal). For a folk memory, see Benudhar Kalita, *Phulaguri Dhawa* (In Assamese, Deurigaon, Nowgong, 1961.)

12. Observation by a missionary in *Arunoday*, 9 (Jan. 1854). The scarcity of coins as circulating media of exchange continued till early fifties. For a corroboration, see T. K. Agarwala, ed., *Haribilas Agarwala Dangariivar Atmajivani* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1967), p. 14.

An anonymous letter published in *Samachar Darpan*, 18 June 1832, protested against the exorbitant rate of land revenue and unjust assessment. For problems of transition, see A. Guha, "Colonisation of Assam: years of transitional crisis (1825-40)", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (Delhi), 5 (June 1968), pp. 125-48.

situation naturally tended to inhibit any expansion of agricultural acreage.

PLANTER RAJ STRIKES ROOTS

Rob Peasants to Pay Planters

The Assam Company—the first joint-stock company of India to be incorporated with limited liabilities under an Act of Parliament in August 1845—was started in 1839. It remained virtually the sole planter in the field till 1850. By 1859 the Jorehaut Tea Co. and several individual enterprises started. The total number of tea estates under distinct proprietors was then fifty-one. The total acreage under tea plants in Assam proper increased from 2,311 acres in 1841 to about 8,000 acres by 1859, and the output of tea from 29,267 lbs. to more than one million lbs. However, the Assam Company still accounted for 60 per cent of the acreage.¹³ Facing an acute labour shortage, the planter community urged upon the Government to further enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on the plantations. Yet another recommendation of theirs was to put a ban on the cultivation and sale of opium, the widespread consumption of which was believed to have made the local people apathetic to work.¹⁴ The cultivation of poppy in Assam proper had almost trebled while the population had increased ten per cent or so under British rule between 1826 and 1853.

After some initial hesitation, Government responded favourably. A 15 to 30 per cent increase in the land revenue rates on the dry crop lands of four districts—Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Nowgong—was ordered.¹⁵ It also put a ban on the cultivation of poppy in 1860, but the lucrative monopoly sale of north Indian opium, yielding a profit to the Government at least since 1851-52, was not discontinued. The sale price of this opium was however

13. A. Guha, "Colonisation of Assam : second phase 1840-1859", *IESHR*, 4 (December 1967), pp. 1-2. For the 1859 acreage figures, *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal*, Vol. 37 (Calcutta, 1861), pp. 33-35 and Memorandum of Campbell in *Papers Relating to the Tea Industry of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1873), Appendix D, p. 121.

14. Antrobus, n. 7, p. 99.

15. Barpujari, n. 6, p. 205. Also letters published in the *Friend of India* (Calcutta) as cited in an editorial comment of *Arunoday*, 10 (February 1860), in anticipation of the tax increase.

increased from Rs. 14 per *seer* in 1860 to Rs. 20 in 1862 and Rs. 23 by 1873.¹⁶ People were thus forced to purchase high-priced Government opium, instead of growing it themselves. It appears that the prohibition of the cultivation of poppy—practically the only crop peasants could readily dispose off for a cash earning—and the raising of the opium price were both motivated not so much by humanitarian as by revenue considerations.

The land revenue rates were uniformly and arbitrarily doubled in 1868, throughout Assam Proper.¹⁷ As a result of these enhanced rates implemented during the years 1868-71, the total land revenue demand there jumped up from Rs. 1001,773 in 1864-65 to Rs. 2165,157 in 1872-73. In some parts of Assam, people reacted to the new assessment by organising *raij mels* (peoples' assemblies). In Lakhimpur district, the people protested in a novel way. They surrendered so much of their land to the Government that the revised rates, though about double the previous rates in force, yielded an enhancement of only about 26 per cent in the total land revenue collection. This was at a time when the acreage under food-grains was failing to increase sufficiently to meet the rising local demand for food. Food prices were higher in Assam than in any part of neighbouring Bengal. Yet the relevant Administrative Report for the year 1871-72 commented: "The whole question whether low rates would lead to increase of cultivation is a difficult and doubtful one".¹⁸

Chattel Slaves Become Tenants

One of the few good things that the Raj did and was appreciated both by the planters and the people was the abolition of slavery in 1843. As an institution, slavery was not of mere marginal importance to the labour-short economy of the Brahmaputra Valley. An estimated five to nine per cent of its population appear to have been slaves and bondsmen, a considerable number of whom worked on agricultural farms. The abolition of slavery almost crippled the old

16. Barpujari, n. 6, p. 207.
Opium prices are from J. J. S. Driberg, "Appendix XXX—Historical account of the administration of opium in Assam", *Royal Commission on Opium*, 1893, Vol. 2, n. 10, p. 140.
17. The erstwhile Ahom territory, i.e., the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup.
18. Commissioner's order, vide letter No. 665, 14 Nov. 1868 as cited in K. C. Bardoloi, ed., *Sadaraminar Atmajivani* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1960), p. 40. Also *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1872-73, p. 82 and *ibid*, 1871-72, p. 140.
For the reference to Lakhimpur, Mackenzie as cited in L. Barua's speech, 10 Sept., *ALCP* (1929), Vol. 9, p. 1069.

Ahom aristocracy. The Brahmin and Mahanta landowners who had long depended on their slaves and bondsmen for the cultivation of their *devottar*, *brahmottar* and *dharmottar* lands were also severely affected. The Brahmin slave-holders of the district of Kamrup even held a protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities a bunch of one thousand petitions seeking permission to retain their slaves and bondsmen. On the other hand, enthusiastic men like Radhanath Katak, a Fauzdari Mohrur, were there to induce the slaves and bondsmen to address petitions to the Government for their liberation and then, to expedite action thereupon.¹⁹

Slavery, as an institution, was so deep-rooted in the contemporary Assamese way of life that it took decades, in the absence of a rehabilitation programme, to die out. Records do not suggest their large-scale opting out either for employment in tea gardens or as wage-labour in villages. The bulk of them appear to have emerged, in due course, under the prevailing conditions of land abundance and capital-shortage as poor tenants. The immediate aftermath of the abolition of slavery was therefore a break-up of whatever large-sized farms there had been if any at all, for lack of hired labour to take the place of slaves. In fact the process of transformation of chattel slaves into serfs and semi-serf tenants had already started long before the formal abolition of slavery. Besides, the practice of mortgaging labour to a creditor as a means of settling one's debt was never suppressed. The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859, was a new positive step towards strengthening this form of debt-slavery.

Colonisation Scheme of Jenkins

The Charter granted to the East India Company in 1833 marked the final ascendancy of the British industrial interests over the mercantile interests and had its full impact on the settlement of newly conquered Assam. The Charter, for the first time, allowed Europeans to hold land outside the Presidency towns on a long-term lease or with free-hold rights. This paved the path for a colonial plantation economy.

Even before the feasibility of tea culture in Assam had been firmly established, Francis Jenkins in his report, dated 22 July 1833, advocated for the settlement of Englishmen of capital on its

19. *Sadaramiinar Atmajivani*, n. 18, p. 40. See also A. Guha, "Land rights and social classes in medieval Assam", *IESHR*, 3 (Sept. 1966), pp. 230-5 for the roots of the institution.

wastelands. It appeared to him that a scheme of colonisation "offered a better prospect for the speedy realisation of improvements than any measures that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralised state of native inhabitants". His idea was to attract a class of European planters along with their capital who would produce sugarcane, indigo and such other plantation crops. "To obtain the full advantages that could accrue from European settlers, it appears to me", he said, "that the grants must be altogether freehold, subject to no other condition than the payment of a fixed and unalterable rate of rent and absolutely unencumbered with any stipulations in regard to ryots or sub-tenants".

Jenkins would not mind even the displacement of the local ryots from their lands through the operation of a discriminatory land revenue policy in favour of white colonists. For such a policy, according to him, would promote the long-run interests of the ryots themselves. He was afraid that "if the government assessments upon the natives were generalised and not heavy", they would not be available as tenant-cultivators under European superintendence and, therefore, the introduction of commercial agriculture would be inhibited. On the other hand, if the assessment on cultivation was heavy, the ryots would have no other alternative than working for the European capitalist farmers. Any shortfall in the total proceeds of land revenue resulting from the twin policies of squeezing the peasant holdings and granting substantial revenue concessions to planters—Jenkins believed—would be more than made up as soon as large quantities of wastelands were brought under tillage, and other improvements followed. The two premises of this colonisation thesis were: (i) that a large number of local peasants had no means to provide ploughs, seeds and cattle for themselves and (ii) that the colonists would be able to make necessary advances to the former for growing export crops.²⁰

Land to the Planter : A New Slogan

The idea of introducing British enterprise, capital and skill in agriculture caught the imagination of the Board of Revenue and the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. Meanwhile the growing prospects of tea culture in Assam—the formation of the Tea Committee in early 1834, the starting of the Government Experimental Tea

20. Jenkins to Secy. to Govt. at Fort William, 22 July 1833, *Foreign Pol. Proc.*, 11 Feb. 1835, No. 90 (NAI).

Gardens in 1836 and the first successful manufacture of Assam Tea in December 1837—made Jenkins's scheme of colonisation all the more acceptable. In 1840, two-thirds of the Government Experimental Gardens were transferred to the Assam Company, rent-free for the initial years. To make the wastelands available for special cultivation on attractive terms, a set of rules were framed. These were known as the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838.

Wastelands on a fortyfive years' lease were offered to applicants on condition that a quarter of the area must be cleared within five years, failing which the land was liable to resumption. Indigenous aspirants were not discriminated against as such, but the Rules were apparently framed in a manner so as to exclude them from all concessional grants in practice. No grant for agricultural purpose could be made for less than 100 acres at a time and to one who did not possess capital or stock worth at least Rs. 3 per acre. Under these conditions only Europeans could avail themselves of the opportunities.²¹ According to these Rules, one-fourth of a grant was to be held revenue-free in perpetuity. The remaining portion of the grant, too, was to remain revenue-free for the initial 5 to 20 years, the period varying according to the nature of the wastelands concerned, as is shown below, in a tabular form.

WASTELANDS SETTLEMENT RULES : 1838 AND 1854

<i>Rules of 6 March 1838</i>				<i>Rules of 23 October 1854</i>	
<i>Three categories of Wastelands</i>				<i>Irrespective of Categories of Wastelands</i>	
<i>Under Grass</i>	<i>Under Reeds & High Grass</i>	<i>Under Forests</i>	<i>Land Revenue per acre</i>		<i>Land Revenue per acre</i>
First 5 yrs.	First 10 yrs.	First 20 yrs.	Nil	First 15 yrs.	Nil
Next 6-8 yrs.	11-13 yrs.	21-23 yrs.	9 as.	16-25 yrs.	3 as.
Next 9-30 yrs.	14-35 yrs.	24-25 yrs.	Rs. 1-2 as.	26-99 yrs.	6 as.
On expiry of leases:		at per with rice lands			at per with rice lands
One-fourth of grant perpetually		revenue-free	One-fourth of grant revenue-free perpetually		

Source : *Tabulated from information in B. H. Baden-Powell, The Land Systems of British India, Vol. 3, (London, 1895), pp. 410-15.*

21. Revenue and Judicial letters from India and Bengal, 14 March 1837, No. 5, cited by Barpujari, n. 6, p. 212; Gait, n. 2 p. 359.

However, since the 1838 Rules did not go far in attracting European capitalists, these were revised in 1854 providing for a 99 years' lease on more liberal terms as indicated in the table. At the same time, the minimum area of land for which one could apply was raised to 500 acres. Later the limit was reduced to 200 acres and made relaxable even to 100 acres in special cases, if native applicants could satisfy the Collectors of their ability to bring ryots from outside Assam. These rules stimulated a land rush not only in Assam proper, but also in the districts of Cachar and Sylhet.

The wastelands settlement policy tempted the planters to grab more lands than what was required or what they could manage. This was because such wastelands provided them with much more resources than what land as a factor of production ordinarily denotes. They contained necessary housing materials including, in many cases, even valuable timber. Being transferable under the 1854 Rules, such lands could later be sold with an unearned profit. Above all, labourers could also be settled as tenants on the surplus lands of the plantations, like so many serfs tied to the soil. It was an additional bait to allure land-hungry tribal peasants from famine-stricken areas outside Assam to come and work at wages otherwise unattractive. Yet another motivation behind this perverse land grab policy was to keep away the prospective competitor from the neighbourhood.

To facilitate the land-grabbing, the system of fee simple grants was introduced in 1861 under which land was sold at rates ranging from Rs. 2-8 to Rs. 5 per acre. No clearance condition was attached to the fee simple grants. Leases under the former Rules were made commutable to fee simple at 20 years' purchase payable at the time of commutation. From 1862 onwards, grants were put on auction sale. From 1876 the sale of fee simple land was stopped and a new system of 30 years' leases, also on liberal terms, was introduced.²²

About 0.7 million acres of land had been settled with the planters in Assam by 1870-71, but the area actually under tea was only 56,000 acres,—8 per cent or so thereof.²³ While the peasants paid annually Rs. 3 to Re. 1-8 annas per acre of their land holdings towards land revenue in 1870, the planters paid nothing at all for the major part

22. Gait, n. 2, pp. 359-60; Barpujari, n. 6, pp. 212-4. For the 1859 acreage figures, *Selections : Bengal Govt. Records*, 1861, n. 13, pp. 33-35.

23. Altogether 6,25,780 acres in Assam were held by the planters under concessional grants and 33,761 acres under ordinary settlement rules. *Report on the Land Revenue Administration of the Lower Province, 1870-71*, pp. 43-44.

of their holdings. They paid towards land revenue only a nominal rate of three annas to nine annas and, in rare cases, Re. 1-2 annas per acre, for the remaining part.²⁴ They were the biggest landlords in the countryside they dominated, but they paid the lowest average rates per acre of holdings. Not only did they employ wage-workers, but they also settled tenant-cultivators on their lands, so that in peak seasons the latter could provide them with casual labour. The planters usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the *jhum* (slash and burn) rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. They even disrupted inter-village communications by fencing in portions of the existing public roads and denying the right of way to the villagers. There were cases where cultivators' lands, not yet regularly settled, were sold as wastelands to tea companies over the heads of their occupants.²⁵

Wage-Slaves on Plantations

The Assam Company in its early years paid its imported Chinese staff—some 70 workers at one stage—four to five times the wage rate paid to the corresponding categories of Assamese labour.²⁶ After the services of the Chinese workers were dispensed with in 1843, the local people remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry till 1859. The total labour force on Assam plantations in that year did hardly exceed 10,000 although the requirement for the province was put by the knowledgeable planters at 16,000 to 20,000 hands for current cultivation alone.²⁷ The most important source of recruitment was the Kachari tribe of the Darrang district. Besides, peasants of near-by villages in their slack season were also employed through contractors.

The wage-rate generally varied between Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 3.50 per month in the 1840s and early fifties, and it rose to Rs. 4 immediately after the revolt of 1857. In the absence of indentured labour till then, these wages in the given context were, on the whole, not unfair. This was because the local labour had a bargaining power. It is on record that the labour of the Assam Company struck work in 1848 and *gheraoed* the Superintendent's office to realise three months' arrears of their wages. They were able to secure an

24. Land Revenue rates on ordinary cultivation in 1870 are from Gait, n. 2, pp. 342-3. For the concessional rates see the table in the text above.

25. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1867-68, p. 144 and *ibid*, 1871-72, Pt. I., pp. 143-4.

26. Antrobus, n. 7, pp. 383 and 388.

27. *Selections : Bengal Govt. Records*, 1861, n. 13, pp. 63-66 and 69-72.

assurance for no more default in payment of wages in future. Again in 1859, the Company's Kachari labour struck work for a wage increase. This time, with the help of the district magistrate, the leaders of the strike were apprehended, tried on the spot and punished on the plea that any stoppage of work before the expiry of their contract was illegal.²⁸ The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859, thus came to the rescue of the planters in the given situation of acute labour scarcity.

Conditions soon changed after indentured labour began to appear on the scene, and prices of wage-goods went on increasing. The labour policy of the planters and their Government was not to encourage a free labour market by offering competitive wages. Unlike the public works department and railways, the planters made the worst use of semi-feudal methods of reducing the free labourers to a kind of serfdom. In 1864, while a free labourer was able to earn a wage of Rs. 7 per month when employed by the public works department, the going rate of wages in the Assam Company's plantations was only Rs. 4 to Rs. 5. The average wage earned in many tea gardens was even as low as Rs. 3.50 per month. The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 did not stipulate the minimum wage, but required the wage rate to be stated in the written contract. However, the actual payment was made proportionately to the amount of work done, according to a tariff of task work shown to the recruit in Calcutta.²⁹ Obviously the Act was passed merely for licensing recruiters and registering in-migrants—in short, to regularise the recruitment through *arkattis* (agents) that was going on for some time.

Statutory wages were laid down by the amending Act of 1865. Though the provision was formally abolished in 1870 by another amendment, it was re-enforced under the Inland Emigration Act of 1882, and the same statutory wages continued in practice upto 1901. The minimum wages so set were Rs. 5 and Rs. 4, respectively, for men and women workers above the age of 12. Child labour was to be paid Rs. 3 per month. The planters had undertaken to supply labour with rice at Re. 1 per maund. The relevant legislation merely provided for the supply of rice at a specified rate, to be included in the terms of the written contract. But once a rate was specified, it

28. Antrobus, n. 7, pp. 97-8 and 389; P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), pp. 304-6.

29. *Bengal Legislative Council Proc.*, 1865-67, p. 14. Antrobus, n. 7, p. 389.

had to be maintained. Planters soon began to violate their own undertaking and started charging around Rs. 2-8 per maund of rice supplied to labour. Thus they could lower the real wage by manipulating the stipulated price of rice. Even the nominal minimum wage could be lowered by varying the standard task. A commission of enquiry appointed in 1867 found that Rs. 3 per month was a fairly common earning for men, and that in most gardens minimum wages were not earned. There were even instances where the wage payment was kept in arrears for as long as six months.³⁰

The Act of 1865 prescribed nine hours of work per day and six days per week. It also laid down that a contract must not extend beyond three years. But, for lack of proper inspection, these provisions of the Act were not observed. So was the case with the provision for a hospital in every garden. The afore-mentioned commission of enquiry found that, generally speaking, the protective clauses had broken down.³¹ Desertion on the part of the worker was made criminally punishable under the Act, and even continued 'laziness' on his part was a criminal offence. The planter was empowered in his own district to arrest without warrant any worker alleged to have absconded from his tea garden, and this privilege he enjoyed right upto 1908.

Under the Amendment Act of 1870, the *sardari* system of recruitment was recognised, though not allowed to replace forthwith the *arkatti* (licensed recruiter) system. From that time till 1915, both the methods of recruitment were in vogue, side by side. Yet another amendment passed in 1873 permitted free recruitment outside the provisions of the Act of 1865, provided that the contract did not extend beyond one year. As the penal clauses could not be imposed on the labourers so employed, planters were not at all interested in this mode of recruitment. However, this provision indirectly legalised their old practice of inducing time-expired emigrant labourers to enter into fresh contracts under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (1859).³²

By the mid-sixties, the policy of recruitment of labour from other provinces was well under way. Available early labour statistics are

30. Secy. to Govt. of Bengal to Secy. to GI, Home Dept. 3 Dec. 1866 and Agent to the G. G. and Commissioner of Assam to Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, 21 March 1867, *Assam Proc. Legis. Dept.*, Govt. of Bengal, August 1867, No. 15. *Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam*, 1868, p. 50.

31. Griffiths, n. 28, pp. 261-71.

32. *Ibid*, pp. 272-4.

imperfect. Nevertheless they are adequate to show the change that was going on in the ethnic composition of the labour force. Of a total plantation labour force of 34,433 in Assam proper, as reported by the Bengal Administrative Report for 1867-68, 22,800 or two-thirds were imported labour; and only 11,633 or one-third local. The total number of outside recruits, net of all wastages by way of deaths, desertion etc., stood approximately at 24,000 in Assam proper and 20,000 in Cachar on 31 December 1872.³³ Living far away from their homes and hearths and contract-bound, these labourers were undoubtedly the most easily exploitable and exploited section of the people.

Conditions of recruitment were inhuman. During the period of two years from 15 December 1859 to 21 November 1861, the Assam Company brought 2,272 recruits from outside of whom 250 or 11 per cent died on the way. Of a total of 2,569 recruits who were sent down the Brahmaputra in two batches during the period from 2 April 1861 to 25 February 1862, as many as 135 died or got drowned and 103 absconded. Of 84,915 recruits for Assam between 1 May 1863 and 1 May 1866, 30,000 died by 30 June 1866. This high mortality did cost the planters. For the price charged by contractors per recruit ranged from Rs. 12 to Rs. 20.³⁴ Men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped, and traded like cattle; absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves. Under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859, Sections 490 and 492 of the Indian Penal Code (1860) and the Labour Act of 1863, as amended in 1865, 1870 and 1873, runaway workers could be punished by the Government alone. Yet the planters themselves generally disciplined such workers, inflicting upon them punitive tortures of all kinds. For labour was too precious to be sent out of their tea gardens to police and jail custody.³⁵

MODERN POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: BEGINNINGS

Threshold of Modernisation

It was during the immediate pre-British period, 1770-1826, that the

33. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1867-68, p. 204 and *ibid*, 1872-73, p. 390.

34. Note by J. W. Edgar, Off. Junior Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, 11 Sept. 1873 in *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, 1873, p. XIX. *Proc. of Legis. Dept.*, Govt. of Bengal, 1863, No. 15-18.

35. Griffiths, n. 28, pp. 269-73; D. Chaman Lal, *Coolie : The Story of Labour and Capital in India*, Vol. 2 (Lahore, 1932), p. 5.

Assamese people had taken to the cultivation of poppy and the consumption of opium. During that period, their territory was devastated by prolonged civil wars, followed by the Burmese occupation; their population dwindled down to less than half of what it had been; their smiling fields were overtaken by jungles. In the first decade of the British take-over, these conditions continued to worsen under the burden of taxation and mismanagement. In the long run, however, the British rule made an attempt to play for some decades a developmental role, within its colonial limits. Was not the country to be prepared for meaningful, economic exploitation?

Although Jenkins's scheme failed to bring in permanent European settlements because of climatic and other reasons, European capital and immigrant Indian labour from other provinces nevertheless did settle down on the tea estates of Assam. Despite its limited linkage effects, the plantation economy also began to generate a network of secondary economic activities within three decades of its coming into existence. Administration was successfully prevailed upon by the planters to build roads and bridges and to ply steamer services on the Brahmaputra. Traders and bankers from other Indian provinces flocked to Assam and, in the absence of local business acumen, they provided the economy with the necessary, yet exploitative services of trading and banking. All these factors helped the rapid growth of the population of the Brahmaputra Valley—from an estimated one million in 1826 to about two millions by 1872—and of the economy as well. But the economic growth was almost entirely limited to its foreign-owned and foreign-managed sector. The base of exploitation for British capital was ramified and expanded. Alongside of it, missionary and administrative activities led to the founding of English schools and printing presses—an infrastructure, based on which a colonial bastard bourgeois culture could now germinate.

Dewan and Dhekial-Phukan: Two Trends

The beginnings of modern political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley can be traced from 1853, when Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) submitted their memorials to A. J. Moffat Mills who had come to enquire into the conditions of the province and to recommend measures for their improvement.³⁶ Despite his early collaboration with the British, Maniram—the last of

36. For the full text of the memorials, A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Calcutta, 1854)—appendices.

the old aristocrats—had turned an extremist and had by then taken an anti-British stance. On the other hand, born in an enlightened Brahmin landowner family and educated in the Hindu College of Calcutta, Anandaram believed in the regenerative role of British rule and remained a loyal Government servant until his death. These documents reveal two opposite trends in the new political consciousness that was emerging. But both reflected on certain popular grievances that were going to dominate Assam politics for a century to come. Hence, the thoughts contained in them need a careful assessment, in the context of the times.

In one of his two memorials, Dewan pleaded for the restoration of the Rajah's domain in upper Assam as a Protectorate, which—once conceded in 1833—was finally resumed in 1839 on charges of mal-administration. He resented the reduction of the upper and landed classes to the most abject and hopeless state of misery through the abolition of their offices, the liberation of their slaves and their unprecedented subjection to the assessment of land revenue. He protested against the appointment of several "Bengalees from Sylhet" and Marwaris as mauzadars when a number of respectable Assamese were already out of employ. It was pointed out by him that by the introduction of new customs, "innumerable courts, an unjust system of taxation and the objectionable treatment of the Hill Tribes, the consequence of which has been a constant state of warfare, . . . neither the British Government nor their subjects have gained any benefit". It was charged that the continued sale of *abkari* opium by the Government had made the people unfit for agriculture, and that the discontinuation of the puja at *Kamakhya* had invited calamities upon the country.

However, the memorial was not blind to the good aspects of British rule in Assam. It noted that by stopping such cruel punitive practices as the mutilation of one's limbs and the forcible abduction of virgins from private homes, by removing all way-side transit duties and by abolishing the system of forced labour for keeping roads clear for the Government, "the British Government has earned for itself inestimable praise and renown".

In course of the memorial, both an immediate stop to the sale of monopoly opium and a phased programme of gradual prohibition of poppy cultivation within twenty years were recommended. A cheaper and simpler system of administering justice through

panchayats was also advocated, alongside the restoration of native rule under British protection, at least in a part of Assam.

Dewan's political platform was no doubt a revivalist one, betraying his orthodoxy and basic loyalty to an outmoded social system. Nevertheless, he was not totally blind to the needs for change and for opening up of the country for exploitation of its resources. He admitted that the abolition of slavery and the introduction of modern schools would do good to the common people. Even though no concessional land grants were made available to him, he came forward to establish two small proprietary tea gardens of his own, which were confiscated by the state after his execution for treason in 1858. Incidentally, the second notable Assamese tea planter was Rosheswar Barua, who established about half a dozen tea gardens in the sixties, but could not survive the tea crisis of 1866-69. In the same crisis, sixteen Indian tea gardens in Goalpara district alone were literally nipped in their buds.³⁷

Dewan did not subscribe to an ideology, progressive enough even in the context of his times, nor was he a very consistent freedom fighter throughout his career. But because of his role in the revolt of 1857, it is the anti-imperialist image of his that lives through peoples' memory—in folk-songs and modern patriotic literature. He had an entrepreneurial career which was objectively progressive. He was indeed a bridge between the old and the new.³⁸

Dhekial-Phukan, on the other hand, was in every respect a product of the modern age of enlightenment. He got his inspiration from the contemporary 'Bengal Renaissance' and from what he read about England's material progress and Peter the Great's reforms in medieval Russia. He dreamt of days when reforms and material progress would surely dawn upon Assam. He reportedly wrote to Hemchandra Barua (1835-96), a confirmed atheist and young social reformer of the day:

"A group of people styled as Young Bengal has emerged in Bengal and some people in Assam are absorbing what is good in

37. A. K. Sharma, "Asamar cah udyogat bideshii muldhan", *Sadinia Navayug* (In Assamese, Gauhati), 30 October 1963, p. 27. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1867-68, p. 207 and *ibid*, 1868-69, p. 191.

38. See for details A. Guha, "Impact of Bengal Renaissance on Assam 1825-75", *IESHR*, 9 (Sept. 1972), pp. 288-304.

them, but not their vices. My mind is full of joy at the sight of this germination".³⁹

One of his publications in Bengali, *Notes on Laws of Bengal*, Vol. I (Calcutta, 1855), was modelled on Blackstone's commentary on English Law Digest; it dealt with such topics as principles of morality and law, human rights, liberty of the person and master-servant relations. This book and his articles in the Assamese periodical, *Arunodaya* (1846-83), reveal his faith in the bourgeois values of life.

The memorial Dhekial-Phukan submitted also espoused the cause of the persecuted Assamese language. It had lost its rightful place to Bengali in local schools and courts in 1837 on the false ground that it was a dialect of the latter language. The battle for due recognition of Assamese as a distinct and separate language was carried on through Dhekial-Phukan's long-drawn efforts, alongside those of the American Baptist missionaries. As a result of the agitation, Assamese was finally recognised for use in courts and schools of Assam proper several years after his death, under the Bengal Government order of 19 April 1873. Bengali, of course, co-existed side by side. Besides, due to paucity of suitable books in Assamese, text-books published in Bengali continued to be in use in all high schools in the plains, at least for another two decades.

In the same memorial, Dhekial-Phukan also laid bare the existing evils of the administration and advocated for an increase in the number of mofussil courts and native judges, with enlarged powers for the latter. Like Dewan he, too, recommended the lightening of the tax burden and simplification of the complicated procedure in the law courts. In his opinion, the Bengal system of permanent settlement of land tenure would not suit the needs of Assam.

As to the opium policy, Dhekial-Phukan warned that the replacement of locally-produced opium by *abkari* opium, sold on a monopoly basis by the Government, would not at all lead to the eradication of the evil. He rather suggested that the sale of Government opium be discontinued forthwith and that local poppy cultivation be subjected to heavy taxation—the tax being enhanced progressively from time to time. Thus, the opium policy advocated by him was basically the same as Dewan's.

39. Quote from Padmanath Gohain-Barua, ed., *Jiivanii-Sangraha* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1969), p. 22. Translation ours.
For a biography of Dhekial-Phukan, see Gunabhiram Barua, *Anandaram Dhenkial Phukanar Jiivan-caritra* (In Assamese; 1st edn., Calcutta, 1880; 2nd edn., 1915).

*New Politics: the Germination*⁴⁰

The two memorials discussed above indicate some of the major issues that churned the minds of the Assamese middle classes and peasants during the years 1853-73, by which time the so-called Bengal Renaissance had its impact on Assam. It was precisely because of this reason that, despite a conflict of interests between the immigrant Bengali babus and the indigenous *dangariyas* for administrative jobs, their mutual relations had not yet been embittered to the extent it was to be in later times. Assamese and immigrant Bengali adherents to the Brahmo Samaj had a social impact in the growing administrative townships. Gunabhiram Barua (1837-94), a pioneer of the new awakening, was attracted towards the Brahmo Samaj even before 1857, but was formally initiated to the new faith at Dhubri in 1869. True to his zeal for social reform, he married a widow in 1870 and got the marriage registered under the Act III of 1872 in December the same year. Padmahas Goswami of Jakhlabandha Satra was another important Assamese Brahmo who wrote several books in Assamese in the early seventies to popularise the Brahmo movement. Yet another westernising influence on Assam was that of the resident American Baptist missionaries.

Contemporary Assamese public opinion was increasingly focused on three social evils of the day—(i) the plight of the widows of Brahmin, Kayastha and Daivajna castes, (ii) the prevalent practice of polygamy and (iii) the wide-spread addiction to opium. Intellectuals of the day boldly expressed themselves on these issues not only through the local press—there were three such periodicals in Assam proper in 1872—but also through creative literature. Educated people formed societies and circles for dissemination of scientific knowledge and ideas about social reforms. In the years 1857-59, the *Jnan-Pradayini-Sabha* (society for disseminating knowledge) was functioning at Nowgong, under the patronage of Dhekial-Phukan. Yet another society with the same name was formed in upper Assam in 1857, which held regular sunday study circles. Still earlier, towards the close of 1855, the *Asam Desh Hitaishini Sabha* was formed at Sib-sagar for holding study circles every saturday. Poornananda Sharma Deka, a Mohurr in the Criminal Court, who was its secretary in September 1856, issued a circular urging upon the local people to represent their manifold grievances to the Lieutenant-Governor

Halliday, then camping in the district. It appears that the same Poornananda Mohrur was suspended from service for six months in the 1858 trial of the mutineers, for not reporting certain allegedly seditious proceedings to the Government.⁴¹

In 1872, the Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta at the initiative of its Assamese residents. On behalf of this Society, Jagannath Barooah (1851-1907) and Manik Chandra Barooah (1851-1915), then studying in the Presidency College, submitted a memorial on 21 May 1872 to the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, drawing his attention to the potential resources of Assam. The memorial urged upon him to connect the province with Bengal by a railway line—a proposal which was already under his consideration.⁴² These activities reflected the dawning of modern political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar, by that time, were much more involved in the mainstream of Bengal politics. Nevertheless students therefrom, who were residents in Calcutta, asserted their separate identity by forming the *Shrihatta Sammilani* in 1877.

There was no official recognition of this growing political consciousness of the people even at the local level of administration. On 11 June 1852, one hundred and thirteen residents of Gauhati submitted a petition to the district magistrate for the introduction of the permissive Bengal Act of 1850 for the establishment of a municipal board. Accordingly, the first statutory municipal board came into being in 1853—an all-European board, with only three nominated members. No other board in Assam was constituted under the Act. When the question of introducing the Bengal Municipal Act of 1864 came before the Commissioner, he took the stand that Assam's prevailing social conditions did not permit the use of the Act. He asserted that Gauhati was nothing but a permanent camp of Government officials whose butlers and followers constituted the towns-people, and that Assam's towns were merely glorified villages, used as centres for policing the surrounding countryside. Nevertheless, due to insistence of the higher authorities, the Act was eventually extended to Gauhati in May 1865.

Rudimentary beginnings of local boards also had the same history. For example, the ferry fund earmarked for the construction of

41. Ibid, p. 302 and Dutt, n. 11, p. 126.

42. Extract from the memorial reproduced in P. Goswami, *Manikcandra Barua aru teomr yug* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1970), pp. 12-13.

roads and bridges was in every district administered by a small committee of nominated officials and non-officials. But the majority of the committee members were of course Europeans, excepting in such districts as Goalpara and Kamrup, where tea interests were minimal.⁴³

At the Presidency level, Bengal had a Legislative Council formed in 1862 under the Indian Councils Act of 1861. But the representation on this Council was limited to the Bengal Division alone, to the exclusion of the Assam Division.

A SUMMING-UP AND PERSPECTIVE

The period from 1826 to 1873 was a period of transition for Assam's pre-capitalist economy into its colonial phase. British capital penetrated the economy and started building an infrastructure to sustain the exotic capitalistic set-up. Collaborating traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks from other Indian provinces came as camp-followers. Bullock carts, a novelty for the region, were introduced. The economy was monetised. The closed society was exposed to immigration of labour, new skills, new vices and new ideas. Marwari trader-cum-moneylenders monopolised the internal trade as agents of the British trading houses of Calcutta, who in turn worked for their metropolitan counterparts in London. Bengali clerks, doctors and lawyers, with the advantage of their early initiation to English education and the British-Indian administrative system, monopolised Government jobs and professions.

In this context, the new-born, rickety Assamese intelligentsia of the period found itself to be an insignificant minority in the 'urban' sector. Towns of Assam were still mere permanent camps of Government servants and traders or were just glorified villages, where non-indigenous elements constituted the overwhelmingly dominant section. This situation of a complete lack of urbanisation, alongside of the pre-capitalist production relations, was not, and could not be, rapidly altered by the new set-up. (See Appendix-I). Superimposed as it was on a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society of petty producers, the new plantation economy—subjugated to foreign capital and linked with immigrant usury and merchant capital—

43. V. Venkata Rao, *A Hundred Years of Local Self-Government in Assam* (Gauhati, 2nd edn., 1963), pp. 43-44.

could not bring in a radical transformation *within the local society itself*.⁴⁴ The start in modernisation was indeed a false one.

Under the circumstances, the extent of urbanisation that was achieved in due course was practically nil. The incipient Assamese middle class that was coming up was extremely small, weak and unconsolidated as a class. Links between the plantation economy and the surrounding peasant economy—both labour-short—remained tenuous and minimal. Except land, practically all other inputs of production for the expanding modern sector were brought from outside the province; capital and enterprise from the metropolis itself and labour from other Indian provinces. A dual economy, more precisely a multi-sectoral, plural economy, began functioning at different levels.

In such an unenviable and complex situation—a situation where tribalism and elements of feudalism persistently co-existed alongside new-born capitalist relationships—the early modern political consciousness was bound to be inhibited and get blurred by group rivalries at the court of the colonial masters. But outside it, the peasantry—traditionally unaccustomed to any kind of money taxation and now constantly in dread of the enhancement of land revenue and imposition of new taxes—kept up the smouldering fire of protest and hatred against the Raj.

The emergent middle-class took its own time under the circumstances to identify the root cause of many of the evils with Imperialism. How this happened in due course, how the safety-valve of controlled parliamentary activities was built into the political system, how sections of people got themselves increasingly involved in electoral politics, and finally how the freedom struggles fought outside the legislatures made inroads into the latter and *vice-versa*—all these will be narrated and discussed in the following chapters.

44. The pattern has been analysed in details elsewhere. See Guha, n. 12 and n. 13. Also by the same author, "Socio-Economic changes in agrarian Assam" in M. K. Chaudhuri, ed., *Trends in Socio-Economy Change in India 1871-1901* (Simla, 1967), pp. 569-622.

A New Province *Sans* Legislature : 1874-1905

STRANGE BED FELLOWS: ASSAM PROPER AND SYLHET

The inconvenience of governing the Assam districts as a division of the unwieldy Bengal Presidency had long been recognised. Quite different local conditions and the unique position there of its European planters warranted the creation of a new province to ensure administrative efficiency. Accordingly Assam proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and the other hills districts, was formed into a Chief Commissioner's province on 6 February 1874. Although vast in area, this new province with its small population of 2,443 thousands had a meagre revenue potential. To make it financially viable, the authorities therefore decided in September to incorporate into it the populous, Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet which, historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal. Even with this additional 1,720 thousand people of Sylhet, the new province was only about half as populous as the Central Provinces. The latter was then India's next least populous province.

A memorial protesting against the transfer of Sylhet on behalf of both its Hindu and Muslim inhabitants was submitted to the Viceroy on 10 August 1874. The memorialists based their protest on the cultural identity and historical association that Sylhet had with Bengal and the disadvantages of Sylhet's being yoked with a 'backward' region. They further apprehended that the district would have to put up with laws and institutions inferior to what it had been accustomed to in Bengal under the permanent settlement. The Government of India refused on 5 September 1874 to accede to their prayer. However, the petitioners obtained an assurance of no change

whatsoever either in the system of law and judicial procedure they had hitherto lived under or in the Bengal principles of settlement and collection of land revenue.¹

Even with this guarantee the public opinion of Bengal and Sylhet remained unchanged. The *Hindoo Patriot* published a series of articles to ventilate public protest (e.g., on 7 September 1874). Kristodas Pal, its editor, echoed the sentiments of the Bengalis when he stated that Sylhet was the golden calf which was being sacrificed for the new idol called the province of Assam.² Despite the agitation, Sylhet was however incorporated into the Chief Commissioner's province on 12 September 1874.

Thus the province that emerged was an amalgam of four disparate elements: (i) the preliterate hills districts, speaking diverse tongues, (ii) the five Assamese-speaking districts of the Brahmaputra Valley together known as Assam proper, (iii) Goalpara of the same Valley where the Bengali and the Assamese cultures overlapped, and (iv) the two Bengali-speaking districts of the Surma Valley—Sylhet and Cachar.

The hills districts, inhabited by various tribes together, had an insignificant population. There, a middle class competing for jobs and higher education was yet unborn. The rest of the provincial population was, more or less, evenly balanced between the two Valleys. However, the Surma Valley, in this respect, had an edge over the others until 1911 (see Appendix 2). The population of Sylhet alone matched that of Assam proper. There was practically no Assamese-speaking element in the Surma Valley, whereas in the Goalpara district of the Brahmaputra Valley the majority, according to early Census figures, spoke Bengali. This was because it once formed a constituent part of Bengal continuously for about two hundred years from 1639 to 1822. Besides, the plains tribals of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group constituted another sizable element in the population of the Valley. Under the circumstances, the Bengali linguistic group rapidly increased in number from Census to Census through immigration. It continued to outnumber the Assamese even in the new province well until the partition of Assam in 1947.

The term 'Assam' which had originally stood for only Assam proper—i.e. the erstwhile Ahom territory alone—and later for the whole

1. Letter from the Govt. of Assam, No. Pol-1917-5585, dated 30 Oct. 1924, reproduced in Jan. *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, pp. 51-52; B.N. Chaudhury's speech, July *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 568-75.
2. Pal cited in K. Deb's speech, July *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 590.

of the Brahmaputra Valley that was under a common Commission-
 nership, was now given a wider signification to denote the newly
 emerged composite province.³ The population-mix of the province
 was such that, given the limited opportunities of development, the
 ugly face of valley-ism was bound to arise in due course in Assam
 politics. Perhaps no better administrative arrangement could have
 been devised 'to divide and rule' the province than a European
 Chief Commissioner maintaining the balance of loaves and fishes—
 not power certainly—between the two rival Valleys, jealous of each
 other. The Brahmaputra Valley had an overwhelming Hindu major-
 ity and the Surma Valley a comfortable Muslim majority. In the
 over-all context of the province, Muslims constituted almost one-
 third of the population.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER, PLANTERS AND LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

The Chief Commissioner's Powers

In theory the Chief Commissioner administered his province as a
 delegate of the Governor-General who might resume or modify such
 powers as he had himself conferred. In official terminology, there-
 fore, the Chief Commissionership of Assam was referred to as a local
 administration rather than as a provincial Government. But in prac-
 tice the powers entrusted to the Chief Commissioner were nearly as
 wide as those of a Lieutenant Governor. Subject to the control of the
 Government of India, he was therefore the supreme authority in all
 matters of legislation, finance and administration. There was no
 power within the province—not even a small Council—which had
 the vestige of any legal authority to advise him in such matters.

During the years 1874-1905, Assam had no legislature of its own,
 and the people there had no chance of participating in legislative
 activities of any kind. The Chief Commissioner was no doubt a po-
 werful autocrat. Even so, he was under constant pressure of the pro-
 vince's European planting interests and dared not cross swords with
 them. There was every chance of his losing the job, if he did, as it
 happened with Sir Henry Cotton in 1902.

3. E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (2nd edn., Calcutta/Simla, 1926), p. 337.

Planters and Local Bodies

As owners of hundreds of square miles of inaccessible sprawling tracts, the planters were keen on the development of local communications and the diversion of public funds towards that purpose. They were therefore the chief body of non-officials who were asked by the Government to participate in the local committees set up for the purpose. Since 1874 there were at the district level, the road, the school and the dispensary committees, with one-third ex-officio members in each of them. After the promulgation of the Local Rates Regulation in 1879, all these nominated committees were replaced by a single district committee. Each such district committee had no less than six members, of whom one-third were to be resident non-officials. Members of a district committee were appointed by the Chief Commissioner on recommendations from the district officer. Side by side, there was a provision for branch committees as well, each with at least three members. An analysis of eight district committees so formed in 1880 in the plains districts clearly indicates the European planters' domination over them. It was therefore natural that the non-official Indian members would lose all interest in these bodies.⁴ Particularly, the zamindars of Sylhet and Goalpara were opposed to the Local Rates Regulation. Their plea was that hospitals, schools, lunatic asylums etc. should be supported out of the general funds of the Government, as in Bengal and other parts of the Empire, without special taxation for such purposes.⁵

The Government of India Resolutions of 1881 and 1882, inspired by Ripon, provided the starting point of a new outlook for local self-government in India. They suggested that non-officials should constitute as much as one-half to two-thirds of the total membership of a local body and that the district or subdivisional officer need not be the ex-officio chairman of such a body. The Ripon reforms were stiffly opposed in official circles and were much watered down in course of their implementation through the Government of Assam Resolution of 17 November 1882. It contemplated a non-official chairman, but no bar was put against an official one either. For all the nineteen subdivisions of the plains districts, local boards (called subdivisional boards) were constituted. Each had 8 to 24 members—and in a later

4. The account of the evolution of local bodies is based on relevant information from V. Venkata Rao, *A Hundred Years of Local Self-Government in Assam* (Gauhati, 2nd edn., 1963), pp. 39-100 and 182-275, unless stated otherwise.

5. *The Bengalees* (Calcutta), 2 and 3 April 1880.

period 10 to 30 members—of whom 3 to 4 were officials.⁶ At least half of the non-official resident members were to be elected by the planters in all important tea districts. All other non-official, i.e., Indian members were to be nominated by the Chief Commissioner, except in Sylhet, Kamrup and Sibsagar. In these three districts they were to be elected. Boards so constituted were continuous bodies, half the non-official members retiring every year.

Heavily loaded with ex-officio and elected European planter members, these boards functioned till 1905 and, with some modifications, till 1915. As to their undemocratic composition, the 1883 list is illustrative. In that year out of the 300 members of sixteen sub-divisional boards, 25 per cent were planters' elected representatives and 15 per cent official members. In tea districts, the planters' representation was, of course, much higher than this average. In most of these local boards therefore the Europeans, acting in coalition with the Indian official members, constituted the majority. In 1903-04, out of the 364 members of nineteen local boards, 133 were elected (most of them by planters), 60 ex-officio and 171 nominated members. Of this total membership, 132 or 36.3 per cent were Europeans.⁷

Since in municipal affairs planters' interests were not directly involved, one could perhaps expect the municipalities to have been relatively less crowded by European and nominated Indian elements. There were two sets of municipalities constituted under two separate Acts—one set under the Bengal Municipal Act of 1876, adopted also by the Government of Assam in the same year, and, another set since 1887, under the provisions of the Bengal Municipal Act of 1884. Both types of municipalities co-existed in Assam till 1923 and did not differ from each other in essential principles. Under both the Acts, municipal commissioners were to be nominated or, when specifically so permitted, could also be elected. Under the first Act, the district magistrate or the subdivisional officer was ordinarily to be the chairman, though any other person was also held eligible for

6. Rao, n. 4, p. 188 and *An Account of the Province of Assam and its Administration* (Govt. of Assam, Shillong, 1903) p. 96. In 1884-85, out of 37 members of the Dibrugarh Local Board, 26 members were either officials or planters. The same combination dominated eight other local boards. Rao, n. 4, p. 211ⁿ and pp. 186-8.

7. Worked out from data presented by Rao, n. 4, p. 188ⁿ and *Imp. Gaz. of India*, Vol. 6, n. 16, p. 96 for 1883 and 1903-04 figures, respectively. An obvious printing mistake in Rao's figure for Barpeta is corrected. Also, Rao, n. 4, p. 189.

such appointment. Despite the accent of the Ripon reforms on an elected chairman, the second Act provided that the board could elect its chairman from amongst the municipal commissioners, or, if it so desired, could request the Government to appoint a chairman.

The Ripon reforms contemplated slow introduction of the elective principle in small towns. The Government of Assam therefore proceeded cautiously. By 1905-06, the election principle was introduced only in six municipalities.⁸ Even as late as 1913, there was not a single elected member in ten out of the nineteen municipalities. Out of a total of 125 municipal commissioners in 1885-86 only 59 and, out of 144 in 1900-01 only 53 were elected members.⁹ Thus the ratio of the elected element to the total strength had actually decreased meanwhile. In both the years, Europeans constituted one-fifth of the total strength. As to having an elected chairman, as admissible under the rules in several municipalities, the caution was exercised, under pressure, by the municipal politicians themselves. They would rather forego the honour than offend their ambitious district officers, who were the real makers of Rai Sahibs and Rai Bahadurs. Only Sylhet had a non-official and Indian municipal chairman since 1887. Everywhere else, for about three decades since the Ripon reforms, the district magistrate or the sub-divisional officer continued to retain chairmanship, at the ostensible request of the boards themselves.

Public Concern for Democratisation

European officials reacted adversely to the Ripon reforms. The Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, W.E. Ward, was of opinion in 1882 that the soil of the Brahmaputra Valley was not "fertile enough for local governmental institutions to flourish" because, according to him, the Assamese were devoid of "those business-like habits which are so needful to make a man a useful member of any committee to which he may be appointed".¹⁰ Ward was opposed to elections of any kind—direct or indirect and, of course, also to the appointment or election of a non-official to the chairmanship.

The heavy over-representation given to European planters on the local bodies was rationalised by the Chief Commissioner, C.A. Elliot, in terms of their interest in improved communications. He said :

8. *Report of the Administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam*, 1905-06 (Shillong, 1907), p. 40.

9. Rao, n. 4, pp. 185-6.

10. No. 1784 Home-A, 2 Nov. 1882, cited by Rao, n. 4, p. 84.

"No measure could be more fatal to the prosperity of the Province than any which would tend to alienate the powerful and energetic tea interest and to make its representatives unwilling to continue that assistance which they have hitherto freely rendered with great benefit to themselves and to the State".¹¹ The reforms in Assam were tailored accordingly. The elective principle and the access to chairmanship, both were practically meant for Europeans.

Naturally these reforms never became popular. In 1882 Gangavinda Phukan and Indibar Baruah went from village to village explaining the Ripon scheme and succeeded in awakening some interest among the ryots. They held a big meeting at Sibsagar to discuss the scheme. It passed a resolution demanding that the elected Indian members should constitute five-eighth, European members one-eighth and the nominated officials two-eighth, of the total strength of a subdivisional board; and that the chairman should be chosen by it. These proposals however were found too radical for official acceptance. The Sibsagar Local Board formed in 1883 did not satisfy popular aspirations.¹²

In December 1886, an anonymous comment in *Mau*, an Assamese periodical published from Calcutta, castigated the way the local boards had functioned for three years since their inception. Referring to the bloc of ex-officio members it asked:

"Is self-government taught merely by the officers of another authority tumbling into the public councils and doing work which the public ought to do? Never,.... What functions can members have if the Government are at once the proposers, the controllers of funds and the executives"?¹³

Proceeds of the local rate, collected mainly from the peasants, were not spent on projects which would primarily benefit them. For example, in 1888-89 when a local board grant was needed for the renovation of the Janji Bund to protect thousands of acres of paddy lands from inundation, there was no response at all. "By all means the district officers may keep the tea garden roads in good order,

11. No. 1784 General, 2 Nov. 1882, *ibid*, p. 86.

12. For Sibsagar resolution, *ibid*, p. 84ⁿ; *Indian Echo* (Calcutta), 29 Nov. 1883 and also 20 Nov. 1886.

13. Quoted by N. N. Borra, *Bolinarayan Borra His Life, Work, and Musings* (Calcutta, 1967), pp. 53-54. Bolinarayan himself was an ex-officio member of the Nowgong Local Board in 1889. He caused displeasure of European planter members for hauling it up for irregularities. *Ibid*, p. 79.

but" warned a correspondent of *The Bengalee* on this occasion "they are not at liberty to rob Peter to pay Paul".¹⁴

Chief Commissioner Sir Bampfylde Fuller introduced certain changes in 1904 to provide for elected Indian members in all local boards. The officials' and planters' representations were however retained as before. Of the rest, while some members were still to be nominated, one was to be elected by the voters at the headquarter station, another by the mercantile community and some others by the village authorities (Chaukidari Panchayats), or where the latter did not exist, by the *gaon-burhas* (village headmen who were near-hereditary appointees of the Government). The entire scheme, particularly the obnoxious principle of election of rural representatives by *gaon-burhas*, was vehemently opposed by educated men like Manik Chandra Barooah.¹⁵ Nevertheless elections according to the scheme were held in the year 1905-06, and this mockery of local self-government continued for many years.

ECONOMIC GROWTH: TEA LEADS THE WAY

There was a tremendous growth of the tea industry during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The total land area in possession of the industry doubled and accounted for some one-seventh of the entire settled area in the Assam plains. The acreage, actually under tea in the province, increased from a little over 56 thousand acres in 1872 to 338 thousand acres in 1901; and the output of tea, from about 12 million lbs to 134 million lbs during the same period. The total amount of capital invested in the industry increased from £1 million or even less than that in 1872 to an estimated £14 million (Rs. 210 million) by 1903. This tremendous growth was in response to the rising British demand for Indian tea, both in absolute and in relative terms. For whereas in 1866 only 4 per cent of the British tea imports were from India, this share increased to 38 per cent in 1886 and 59 per cent by 1903.¹⁶

The planters needed an improved infrastructure, particularly communications. Hence, the construction of railways started in

14. *The Bengalee*, 9 March 1889.

15. Rao, n. 4, pp. 95-6.

16. *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India 1891-92 to 1900-01*; Gait, n. 3, pp. 356-7; A. Guha, "A big push without a take-off: a case study of Assam 1871-1901" *IESHR*, 5 (Sept. 1968), pp. 202-4; *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1872-73, p. 20, for the 1872 acreage figure.

1881. The province's railway mileage was pushed up to 114 miles by 1891 and 715 miles by 1903. At an estimated investment of Rs. 131 thousand per mile, the total railway investment made in Assam till that year appears to have been not less than Rs. 95 million (roughly equivalent to £6 m.). With the demand from the tea factories and the railways rising, the output of coal increased from less than 50 tons in 1872 to more than 277,000 tons by 1905-06. The oil-fields developed by British capital in the 1890s increased their annual production of crude oil from 882 thousand gallons in 1900-01 to 2733 thousand gallons in 1905-06. To supply packing boxes and scantlings to the tea industry as many as 14 saw mills were functioning in 1901. British investments in coal, petroleum and saw mills amounted to an estimated Rs. 5.4 million, Rs. 4.6 million and Rs. 1 million, respectively, at the close of the century.¹⁷

Thus the total investment in the organised sector of the economy was no less than Rs. 315 million (£21 m.) or so during the years 1874-1905, even at a conservative estimate. An average investment of a little over Rs. 10 million a year for the province's population rising from 4.2 million souls to 5.8 million in thirty years was indeed considerable. But the big push in the Government and British sectors failed to induce a commensurate growth of the indigenous private sector. What was developing with an amazing tempo was the British-owned and British-managed part of the economy, with labour and middlemen services almost entirely recruited from other Indian provinces.

It may be observed here that only a part of the total British capital invested in tea originated from Britain's own home savings. The major chunk of it apparently was built up out of undistributed profits and ploughed-back dividends of the older companies operating in this country. Between 1854 and 1901, the Assam Company had not raised any additional capital or long-term loans to augment the initial investment. Nor was it in possession of any idle capital resources. Yet it could treble its tea acreage from 3,313 to 10,762 acres during the period. In other words, the real value of the Company's

17. Guha, n. 16, pp. 203-4; *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (New edn., Oxford, 1908), Vol. 6, pp. 70-71; *East Bengal and Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1905-06, n. 8, p. 148; *An Account of the Province of Assam.*, n. 6, pp. 41 and 44; *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1872-73, n. 16, p. 37.

Steamers plying on the Brahmaputra, telecommunications and metalled roads also represented considerable amount of private and public investments. But no estimates for these investments are available. Hence, these are not included in our overall estimate.

investment had meanwhile trebled, despite its distributing an average 15.3 per cent dividend during the years 1872-1901. The total amount so distributed over the years was about five times as big as the initial paid-up capital, of which one-fifth was raised in India. British Companies were started by retired civil servants, army officers and business executives who earned their initial capital legitimately or otherwise while on service in India, but got their companies registered in London. Thus, a considerable part of British investments actually came out of their incomes earned in India.¹⁸

As to railway investments, the risk-taking by private British capital was partly shared or subsidised by the Government. For example, a total subsidy of Rs. 1.2 million was paid to the 91-mile Dibru-Sadiya Railways over the period 1884-1903. The 30-mile Jorhat State Railways was actually a project of the Government of Assam itself "for the convenience of numerous tea gardens in the neighbourhood of Jorhat". It involved a state investment of Rs. 1 million and a cumulative loss of Rs. 0.5 million on the tax-payers' account over the years till 1901. Even local board funds were diverted to the construction of light railways and tramways needed by the tea industry. For example, the 20-mile Tezpur-Balipara Light Railways, in which almost half the share-capital was owned by tea companies, was subsidised by the Tezpur Local Board to the tune of Rs. 0.1 million—a sum equivalent to one-fourth of the paid-up capital and payable in twenty annual instalments. The Board however was not given any shares in lieu of this sacrifice.¹⁹ Besides, the Company received its supply of timber from government forests royalty-free.

The alignment of the railways was done through the thinly populated submontane tea-belt with the obvious purpose of serving the planters' interests best. Old trading centres like Goalpara and Barpeta and towns like Sibsagar were by-passed, thus allowing them to stagnate and decay. The structure of railway rates was biased in favour of the tea industry. With improved communications and an organised trade in indentured coolie supply, thousands of labourers could now be recruited in remote tribal tracts and forwarded to

18. Guha, n. 16, pp. 203-9. The average dividend is worked out from statistics in H. A. Autrobus, *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 409-10.

19. Guha, n. 16, pp. 203-9. By blocking the outlet of water of the Begijan river, the Jorhat State Railways caused water-logging of a large area under cultivation and thus damaged the ryots' interests. *Indian Echo*, 28 Sept. 1886. The quote in the paragraph is from *History of Indian Railways Constructed and the Progress upto 31st March 1918* (G.I. Simla, 1919), p. 248.

Assam. By 1905-06, the adult labour force on Assam plantations swelled to a total number of 417,262. Of this only a few thousands were local men. The mortality rate on the plantations was very high. For example, during the thirteen years ending 1899, it averaged 53.2 per thousand of adult indentured labour.²⁰

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE: ITS IMPACT

The land-abundant economy of the Brahmaputra Valley failed to grow enough foodgrains to feed its increasing population. The annual import of foodgrains into the Valley increased from 0.3 million maunds around 1872 to some 0.7 million maunds during the last five years of the century.²¹ This deficit was marginal, to the tune of less than two per cent of the total requirements, but the tendency in the context was a pointer. With 1884-85 as the base-year, the index number of the total tea acreage in Assam proper, for which alone more or less complete agricultural data are available, steadily increased to 192 in 1900-01. But the comparable index of the total gross cropped area exclusive of the area under tea, after having risen to a peak of 129 by 1892-93, went on decreasing from year to year until it was 113 in 1900-01. Thus, more or less, it just kept pace with the rate of population growth. It was of course the impact of the black fever epidemic (to be discussed below) that explains much of the stagnation. Prices of foodgrains were rising, and many starvation deaths from Nowgong were reported in the bad season of 1896. On 16 October of that year troops had to be called out there to suppress a riotous outburst against the *baniyas* who had cornered the grain market.²² Conditions were further worsened by the Great Earthquake of 1897 that caused many deaths and a havoc over many hundreds of acres of farm lands.

20. *Resolution on Immigrant Labour in the Assam Districts of East Bengal and Assam for the year ending the 30 June 1910* (Shillong, 1910), pp. 1-2. For the mortality rate, Sir Henry Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories* (London, 1911), p. 167.

21. Import figures in *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1871-72, p. 140 and the relevant Assam Administration Reports. For example, as per *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1895-96, App. (82), the import of rice in that year into the Brahmaputra Valley was 754 thousand maunds.

22. *The Bengalee*, 17 Oct. 1896. For the index used, see Guha, n. 16, p. 220—Table 5.

Epidemic Tilts the Population Balance

One important cause of the retarded agricultural growth was no doubt the slow population increase in both the valleys since the mid-eighties. The population increased very fast during the years 1872-81, but its rate of growth slowed down over the next twenty years. During the years 1891-1901, the decadal rate of population growth was 5.7 per cent in the Brahmaputra Valley and a little more than 6 per cent in the Surma Valley. The situation was more serious in the former than what the total figures revealed. Had there been no continuous immigration, the population would have actually gone down.

The black fever (*Kalaazar*) epidemic appeared in Goalpara in 1883, entered Assam proper in 1888 and gradually spread throughout its length and breadth. During the decade 1881-91, the population of Goalpara subdivision decreased 18 per cent and that of Kamrup district, 1.6 per cent. During the next decade, the population of Kamrup decreased 7.1 per cent; that of the Mangaldai subdivision of Darrang, 9 per cent and of Nowgong, 24.8 per cent. Immigration in these areas was marginal. The tea districts, however, were the least affected, much to the relief of the planters. The population of Lakhimpur actually increased 46.1 per cent between 1891 and 1901—an estimated 16 per cent through natural growth and 30 per cent through immigration. The population of Sibsagar increased 24.4 per cent—half the increase being due to immigration.²³

It is clear therefore that the indigenous population of the Brahmaputra Valley tended to be stagnant or even to decrease during the two decades before 1901. On the basis of an exercise, listing up all Hindu indigenous castes and indigenous tribes of Assam proper and their numbers for the relevant census years, the Census authorities came to the conclusion that the indigenous population actually decreased 5.4 per cent between 1881 and 1891 and 6.4 per cent between 1891 and 1901. Later, the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee re-examined the issue. On the basis of a list of indigenous linguistic groups of the Brahmaputra Valley, they came to the conclusion that the relevant decline was actually much less, the respective rates being nevertheless 2.9 and 1.9 per cent. On the basis

23. Ibid, p. 221; *An Account of the Province of Assam*, n. 6, pp. 20 and 129-30; *East Bengal and Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1905-06, n. 8, p. 78; *Census of India, 1901, Vol. 4. Assam—Part I Report* (Shillong, 1902), pp. 16-22.

The increase in Sibsagar was despite the *kalaazar* havoc in the Golaghat subdivision.

of these latter figures, the cumulative decline of the indigenous population of the Valley may be accepted to be at least 7.7 per cent over the last two decades of the century. The non-indigenous population of Assam proper increased meanwhile from less than a lac in a total population of 15 lacs in 1872 to an estimated five to six lacs in a total population of about 22 lacs in 1901. The influx of immigrants more than neutralised the decline in the indigenous population.²⁴ The population-mix thus underwent a substantial ethnic redistribution.

Immigration apart, there was also some internal inter-district migration of the Kachari population from Kamrup and Mangaldai to the tea districts. As a result of the combined effect of these population movements and particularly the epidemic havoc in the Mangaldai subdivision, the indigenous component of the population of Darrang district was believed by the Census authorities to have decreased 8 per cent between 1891 and 1901. Thus, two major demographic changes took place during the years 1874-1905—(a) a shift in the ethnic composition of the population and (b) a change in its spatial distribution over the districts. Non-indigenous elements came to constitute at least one-quarter of the population of Assam proper in 1901. In that year two-fifths of the population of the district of Lakhimpur were enumerated to have been born outside the province, and only 39 per cent as having Assamese as their mother-tongue. People born outside the province constituted a quarter of the population both in Darrang and Sibsagar, in the same year.²⁵ Over the years till 1901, the density of population increased more rapidly in the tea districts than in other areas (Appendix 3).

This major shift in the composition and distribution of population was bound to affect the peasant economy adversely. Most of the immigrants into Assam came from tribal tracts and were absorbed as labour, and sometimes also as tenants, in the plantations. Those who took to cultivation of ordinary crops as tenants were poor cultivators indeed, with their backward techniques and serf-like social status. Despite an increasing demand from the plantation sector for grain, the indigenous peasant economy failed to respond to it adequately, because of an acute man-power shortage.

24. *Census of India, 1901*, Vol. 4, n. 23, pp. 27 and 30; *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report* (Jorhat, 1925), pp. 14 and 97. The revised figures are derived from the population table given on p. 14 of this Report,

25. Guha, n. 16, pp. 211-2.

Thus, there emerged a serious imbalance between the fast-growing modern sector comprising the plantations, coal-mines, oil-fields and the associated infrastructure, on the one hand, and the near-stagnant, traditional agricultural sector on the other. The gap between the income stream accrued and the income disbursed within the province increasingly widened. Not only that the extracted surplus was remitted to UK in the form of fabulously high dividends and individual savings from inflated pay-packets, but also a substantial part of the wage bill was remitted outside the province. For example, by way of money orders alone there was a net outflow of Rs. 4.8 million in the year 1904-05—not a small amount in the context of the presumably low national income of the period.²⁶ Even otherwise a good part of the remaining disbursed income stream was spent on services and goods procured from outside, rather than on local supplies. Thus, the indigenous sector of the economy was only marginally benefited—more so till about 1905—by the characteristically limited spread effects of the colonial development pattern, as was suggested in Chapter 1.

PRODUCTION RELATIONS ON PLANTATIONS

'Legislative Abetment of Slavery'

The British civil servants, who believed in England's civilising mission in India, did not seem ever to have a clear conscience over the burning issue of the coolie trade. As President of the Bengal Legislative Council, even Sir George Campbell himself had not hesitated to describe the recruitment system as one reducing the coolie to the position of a slave. Sir Bampfylde Fuller described the condition of the coolies in an unpublished memorandum as that of "beasts in a menagerie". There loomed all the time in the background like a spectre—as Cotton tells us in his autobiography—the larger and independent question of the protection of thousands of helpless labourers, often transmitted over more than a thousand miles by rail and river, to work on the tea gardens for inadequate wages, under penal provisions.²⁷ And yet the corpus of emigrant labour legislation, produced by this uneasy conscience, turned out practically to be nothing but abetment of the same notorious 'slavery' system.

26. *Data in Financial and Commercial Statistics of British India, 13th Issue* (1907), pp. 258 and 264, as worked out by Guha, n. 16. p. 213.

27. Cotton, n. 20, pp. 247 and 265.

In 1882 the Inland Emigration Act was passed, despite opposition from Kristodas Pal in the Imperial Legislative Council. Of course, there was the assurance that labour recruitment under penal contracts would soon be abolished. The Secretary of State for India in his despatch of 17 July 1886 directed that the working of the Act should be "narrowly watched" and that a report should be submitted not later than 1889, on the advisability of repealing the Act. On 5 October 1891, he even suggested that preferably no contract labour system, modelled on the Act of 1882, should any longer be continued in practice. Yet the amending legislation that followed in 1893 and 1901 differed from each other and from that of 1889 only in the details of their utopian welfare prescriptions. These, in any case, were liable to a total evasion by the planters under the given circumstances of poor inspection. The law in existence meanwhile continued to validate the penal contracts, inadequate wages and the *arkatti* system as before.²⁸ The Law Member in course of the debate on the bill in the Imperial Legislative Council in March 1901 said unblushingly—

"The labour contract authorised by the Bill is a transaction by which, to put it rather bluntly, a man is often committed to Assam before he knows what he is doing, and is thereupon held to his promise for four years, with a threat of arrest and imprisonment, if he fails to perform it. Conditions like these have no place in the ordinary law of master and servant. We made them part of the law of British India at the instance and for the benefit of the planters of Assam".²⁹

How powerful the Assam planters as a pressure group were at the highest level of administration was graphically narrated by Cotton in his autobiography. Like his predecessors he, too, went far in supporting the conduct of the planters and promoting their interests during his Chief Commissionership (1896-1902). He did not hesitate to strain the law for the purpose of recovering runaway coolies

28. Speech by J. C. Ghose, *Proc. of Indian National Congress 17th Session*, Calcutta, 1901, pp. 165-6. Also see editorial comment by Kristodas Pal, *Hindoo Patriot*, 9 Jan. 1882. He called the 1882 Act "Slave Law" in disguise. For Indian nationalist reaction to Coolie legislation in details, see Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi, 1966, reprinted 1969), pp. 360-79.
29. Quote as reproduced by Ghose, n. 28, p. 165. For Indian opinion in the legislature, *ILCP* (1901), Vol. 11, pp. 86-158.

found working for higher wages on the railways and handing them over to their masters. He spent public funds liberally in the furtherance of tea interests and encouraged the planters to take up lands also for ordinary cultivation in the vicinity of their gardens. In the initial three or four years, he even concealed the fact of wanton oppression in his routine labour reports to the Government of India.³⁰

Towards the close of his tenure, in course of an official assignment to investigate into and report on the statutory wage question, Cotton learnt about the horrifying coolie sufferings which, simply as a Chief Commissioner, he would have never known. He decided "not to conceal the truth" any more.³¹

Under the mounting pressure of public opinion in India, Curzon was already pledged to support the general principle of an increase in coolies' wages. A bill was therefore brought before the Imperial Legislative Council in 1899 to alter the time-old statutory wages for men from Rs. 5 to Rs. 6 and for women from Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 per month. But, as a member of the Council, Cotton was shocked to find that even this mild and modest proposal was not acceptable to the British capitalist lobby therein. In spite of his protest, the proposed rates were modified at the committee stage to a graduated scale, with annual increments reaching the full rates only in the fourth and last year of the contract. Curzon announced in the Council a postponement of even this graduated rate for two years, in view of the depression in the tea industry. The Assam Labour and Emigration Bill was enacted on 8 March 1901, by fifteen votes—all European—to four, including the lone European vote of Cotton. The Act was condemned by Indian opinion both inside and outside the legislature. After this show-down, Cotton had finally to go into retirement from service under European pressure. In the role of a British liberal, he carried on his persistent campaign against the planter-Raj ever since. The Indian National Congress expressed its gratitude by electing him president of its 20th annual session at Bombay in 1904.³²

30. Cotton, n. 20, p. 258.

31. Ibid, p. 259.

32. 8 March, *ILCP* (1901), p. 158. Cotton, n. 20, pp. 260-61 and 287; *New India* (Calcutta), 27 August 1901.

The Indian Tea Association's plea was that, in most cases, earnings were low because labour worked "so few days in the week" and also because there was a crisis in the tea industry during 1901-05. See P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), pp. 145-6. The plea, though upheld by Griffiths, is unconvincing.

'Beasts of a Menagerie'

The harrowing tale of coolie oppression, during the period 1874-1905, by planters and their hirelings—the *arkattis* and the *sardars*—needs to be told in details, even at the risk of repetition. For some of its features persisted through the early decades of the twentieth century as well.

Planters used to pay their contractors and agents a sum varying from Rs. 120 to Rs. 150 for every recruit under a penal contract, at the beginning of the present century. The agents frequently resorted to criminal means such as inducing their victims by misrepresentation or by threats. The records of the criminal courts, as Cotton points out, teemed with instances of abduction of married women and children, fraud, wrongful confinement, intimidation and actual violence. Due to congestion, lack of adequate food and the unhygienic conditions, many died like cattle while still on their way to plantations. The overwhelming majority, of course, survived to be sold on to the planters at the prices stated above. At the expiry of the contract period, the coolie was legally free but was repeatedly induced under duress to re-engage himself. Thus, having once come to a tea garden, he had practically no hope of return to his native place.³³

Although prices of wage-goods were rising, the legal minimum wages remained unaltered during the years 1865-1903. The average paid-out wages were even lower. During the seventeen years preceding 1901, for example, these remained well below the prescribed rates as well as what the unskilled labour elsewhere in Assam, or in the recruiting districts, were often earning at that time.³⁴ The wage-rate of able-bodied agricultural labourers in Lakhimpur, e.g., was Rs. 9.37 per month in 1873 and for most of the subsequent period till 1901 it remained within the range of Rs. 7 to Rs. 10. In early 1880s, an unskilled railway construction labour earned Rs. 12 to Rs. 16 per month.³⁵ Free market wages tended to increase during this period, but the Act denied labourer any such increase. On the contrary, the price he had to pay for the concessional rice supply was gradually enhanced from Re. 1 in the early sixties to Rs. 3 by 1900.³⁶

33. Cotton, n. 20, pp. 262-3. Sir Bampfylde Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences* (London, 1930), p. 117; *Somprakash* (Changripota) 11 *shravan* 1293 (1886 A. D.), pp. 461-2 and also 24 *paush* 1273 (1867 A. D.), pp. 153-4.

34. Cotton, n. 20, pp. 261-62.

35. *Imp. Gaz. of India*, Vol. 1 (2nd edn., 1885), p. 361. Guha, n. 16, pp. 206-7.

36. Guha, n. 16, p. 206. Griffiths, n. 32, pp. 304 and 306.

Besides, there were various other forms of semi-feudal exploitation. Wrote Cotton—

“I knew of cases in which coolies in the fourth year of their agreement were not paid the higher rate of salary to which they were entitled. In other cases, rice was not provided at the statutory price and the subsistence allowance prescribed by law was not paid to sick coolies or pregnant women. Advances were often illegally debited against coolies on account of subsistence allowance or sick diet, as well as on account of rewards paid for the arrest of deserters, and labourers were thus bound hand and foot to the garden service. In some instances only a few annas (or pence) found their way into the hands of a coolie as wages in course of the whole year...”³⁷

Such miserable conditions could be imposed upon the coolies, not because of their illiteracy and ignorance as such, but because of their inability to strike work under the bindings of the penal contract. If they struck work, they were liable to imprisonment. If they fled, the planters had the right of arresting them without warrant. Flogging and other kinds of torture, with the connivance of even courts of justice, were the common practice. Fuller refers to the case of a coolie being flogged with a stirrup leather to death by a European Assistant. The murderer was sentenced to 18 months' simple imprisonment by the lower court, but was finally acquitted by the high court under the pressure of European agitation. In another case, a tea garden overseer who had stripped and flogged a woman worker was acquitted on the plea that he had acted under his European manager's orders. Such instances of inhuman treatment were many, and the Indian newspapers were full of them.³⁸

Naturally, under such conditions, the workers had no freedom of movement. Communication with neighbouring tea gardens and villages was under strict control, even prohibited. If a worker's daughter was to be given away in marriage to a resident of another tea garden, the manager's permission was necessary, as it would involve a loss to his actual or potential labour force. In many tea gardens the coolies were virtually prisoners under guard, night and

37. Cotton, n. 20, p. 265.

38. Fuller, n. 33, pp. 118-9. For reference to select newspaper reports see our foot-notes 28 and 33. Also, *Madras Mail*, 11 Sept. 1890, containing an article headed “Legislative abetment of slavery” and *New India* (Calcutta), 26 August 1901 and 11 Nov. 1901, containing Bipin Chandra Pal's articles.

day. "I came across notices posted at river ferries and railway stations describing runaway coolies and offering rewards for their apprehension, that" writes Lieutenant-Governor Fuller "reminded one of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Runaways who were legally arrested were seldom, if ever, made over to the police as the law required".³⁹

The coolie-catching, their transit to the tea gardens under conditions of high mortality, the selling of recruits at a market price, the hunt for runaway coolies—all these remind one of the slave-running in Africa and the global slave trade. But, once on plantations, the coolies were rather treated like serfs, tied to the soil by extra-economic means and, in many cases, also by small allotments of land as cottars on the plantations. Deprived of all freedom, they depended on the planter for the necessities of life and other amenities. The estate manager was the only authority for him, armed with the legal right of arrest and sometimes also with the legal powers of an honorary magistrate. Even otherwise, he arbitrated in all disputes and punished the offender. He built the coolies' houses, supplied rice to them when necessary, established the market and regulated prices.⁴⁰ There was none to challenge him if he chose to have any coolie woman as his concubine. When he went on a *shikar*, he had the labour gangs to beat the jungles for him. He tied the workers into bondage, by advancing money against the wage account. Such a system, that emerged in response to the condition of an acute labour shortage, was more akin to the worst form of serfdom than of slavery. The coolies were, however, essentially neither slaves nor serfs; they constituted the newly emerged working class of Assam, bound together by a common interest against capital in its colonial form.

Class Struggle on Plantations

The plantation labour-force was a multi-lingual, heterogenous society. In 1884-85, 44.7 per cent of them were from Chhotanagpur, 27.2 per cent from Bengal, 21.6 per cent from U.P. and Bihar, 0.2 per cent from Bombay, 0.7 per cent from Madras and 5.5 per cent from within Assam. In 1889, half of them were found to have been

39. Fuller, n. 33, p. 118.

40. See Griffiths, n. 32, p. 376. The interpretation is ours. Also Dwarka Nath Ganguli, *Slavery in Indian Dominion* (K. L. Chattopadhyay, ed., reprint of thirteen articles published in *The Bengalee*, Sept. 1886 to April 1887, Calcutta, 1972), pp. 30-35 and 56.

recruited from Chhotanagpur, about a quarter from Bengal and about 5 per cent only from Assam itself.⁴¹

Illiterate, ignorant, unorganised and isolated from their homes as they were, the plantation workers were weak and powerless against the planters. On the other hand, the latter were well-organised into the Indian Tea Association (ITA), founded in 1881. Nevertheless, the workers fought back at the individual garden level, as is evident from the available official statistics on disputes for the years 1884-93, in forms varying from absconding and occasional litigation to strikes and violent mass attacks on the planters. For example, in 1884 the manager of Bowalia T.E. in Cachar was 'gherao'-ed in his house for his defiantly caning a boy in the presence of the assembled Coolies. About a dozen men were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment from three days to one year on this occasion, while the manager could escape by paying a fine of Rs. 200/- only for his folly. In 1899 Cotton in his report noted that

"there is a growing tendency in the Coolie class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return and this soon leads to serious results, as the Coolies act in combination among themselves, and armed with formidable weapons—the implements of their industry; but this very tendency exercises a healthy influence in restraining the hot-headed and impetuous European assistant from raising his hand against them".⁴²

The public reception given to Chief Commissioner Cotton in the tea district of Cachar was enthusiastically reported in the seventeenth annual session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta in 1901. When he was passing from Fenchuganj to Silchar, the roads for a distance of fifteen miles were reportedly lined with coolies holding lanterns and crying out "Cotton Sahibka Jay" (Long live Cotton!). It was reported in East Bengal newspapers in December 1901 that, during his recent tour, the Chief Commissioner had found every two miles a coolie standing with a banner—"Mr. Cotton, the Protector of the Dumb Coolie".⁴³ Obviously, such a demonstration could not have been organised without a combination of the coolies and sympathetic educated middle class elements.

Although the figures of collisions during the years 1890-1903 were

41. *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1884-85, p. 168 and also 1889-90, p. 136.

42. Report by Cotton in 1899, cited by Griffiths, n. 32, p. 377. Also see Ganguli, n. 40, pp. 36-7, for labour disputes in 1884.

43. Speeches by J. C. Ghose and Bipin Chandra Pal n. 28, pp. 165 and 167.

not numerous, they indicated a steady increase. Admittedly, in Assam conditions were much worse than those obtaining in the Bengal tea districts. Cases of assaults, rioting and unlawful assembly continued to be reported in the Annual Immigration Reports even thereafter. Remembering his experience as the administrator of Assam during the years 1902-06, Fuller writes:

“... there was bound to be some revolt, and on badly managed gardens riots were not very infrequent. They sometimes ended in the burning of the manager’s bungalow...”⁴⁴

Thus, the plantation workers were carrying on their struggle against the colonial exploitation, and they had the sympathy of the Indian middle classes. So determined was the resistance that at last in 1906 a committee was appointed by the Government of India to investigate the working of the labour laws.

PEASANTS RESENT INCREASED TAXATION

Evolution of the Land Tenure System

The system of land tenure in British Assam was not uniform. In the hills districts, the communal or clan ownership was the usual form. But private property rights in land were also there, wherever the terrace cultivation and horticulture had developed. Landholders in the hills districts did not have to pay towards land-revenue; they generally paid a house tax instead. Most parts of Sylhet and Goalpara districts were under a permanent settlement, involving the prevalence of various forms of tenancy and sub-tenancy. Zamindars—big and small—were numerous in Sylhet, while only nineteen families held all the zamindari lands in Goalpara. In the rest of the Assam plains, the system that evolved was ryotwari. What is discussed below concerns, however, mainly the ryotwari areas of Assam proper.

It was under the Settlement Rules of 1870 that the Government, for the first time, categorically and unequivocally recognised the permanent, transferable and heritable rights in *rupit* (wet paddy) and *bari* (homestead) lands in private occupation. A district was divided into *mauzas* or circles, each such unit— a few square miles to 200 square miles in area—being placed under a *mauzadar* for purposes of revenue collection. For appointment as a *mauzadar*, one had to be an influential and well-to-do resident of the *mauza* itself. He

44. Fuller, n. 33, p. 120.

was bound to pay the entire land revenue due from his *mauza* by the end of April. For this obligation, he received a commission at ten per cent on the first Rs. 10,000 and at five per cent on the balance of the revenue paid by him. He was ordinarily succeeded in the office by one of his family. The system helped the growth of a stable and loyal rural gentry that could be relied upon as a strong ally of the administration. In rural areas his position was next to the planter's. Each *mauza* was divided into a number of circles, headed by *mandals* or village surveyors. Like the *mauzadar*, the *mandal* also was a considerable landholder. The latter's pay on a monthly basis being nominal, cultivation was his main business.

Under the 1870 Rules, wet paddy and homestead lands were settled for a period not exceeding ten years at fixed rates, subject to a revision at the end of the period. From 1883, however, settlements made for this category of land were invariably decennial. Other categories of land suitable for dry crops continued to be settled on an annual basis only, since the relevant cultivation was of a shifting nature. These were not vested with permanent, transferable rights and could be taken back by the Government for public purposes without any compensation. The ryot continued to have the option of relinquishing any amount of land under either category, at his own convenience.

The 1870 Rules were in force until replaced by a comprehensive code—the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886—which basically retained all the aforesaid features. A cadastral survey, ordered meanwhile, was completed during the years 1882-93. While the land revenue rates remained unchanged for a quarter century till March 1893, the total land revenue demand had increased substantially because of new additions to the settled area and the detection of concealed cultivation. The settled area in the Brahmaputra Valley increased, e.g., 15 per cent between 1881-82 and 1891-92.

Economic Conditions Worsen

Conditions of the peasantry during the 1880s could not be said to be prosperous, despite the increased demand for farm products from the plantations and railway construction activities. Out of 9,801 professional moneylenders in Assam as per Census Report of 1891, only 1,793 were in the Brahmaputra Valley (1,211 were in Kamrup alone); of the rest, 7,902 moneylenders were in the Surma Valley. The available statistics on land transfers in the province during the years

1884-1893 are not adequate to indicate the extent of prevailing indebtedness. The number of land transfers in any year remained within the range of 12 to 29 thousand cases, and the acreage transferred varied from 40 to 85 thousand acres except for the year 1886-87 when 152 thousand acres changed hands. These figures were not significant in the context of the province's total cultivated acreage around 3.4 million acres.⁴⁵ Even in 1886-87, the amount of land transferred was less than five per cent of the total under cultivation. These early imperfect statistics, however, conceal more than what they reveal. The fact that the market sector of the peasant economy was completely in the grip of the well-entrenched Marwari trading capital ever since the advent of British rule is beyond dispute. Peasants used to receive cash advances from the Marwari traders against pledged crops, to a considerable extent. These traders and their agents were mostly put in the census under the category of petty shopkeepers, rather than as moneylenders. The numerous shops provided a network for the filtration of credit into the rural areas. Peasants also secured loans through the mortgage of their labour to local landlords and traders.⁴⁶

Enquiries made in 1882-83 suggested that there were but few under-tenants except on the partially or wholly revenue-free (*nifkhiraj* and *lakhiraj*) estates of Kamrup. The extent of tenancy on the latter category of land was widespread, but no estimate is available. The family of Parbatia Goswami had 41 thousand acres of land in this category, spread over 31 *mauzas*. It was estimated in 1883 that the Parbatia Goswami and the Madhav Devalay, between them, accounted for no less than a thousand tenant ryots. Such tenants did not enjoy occupancy rights anywhere in the Brahmaputra Valley. The settlement statistics of 1893 revealed that in the Kamrup *mauzas* of Bajali, Bangsa, Barbhag and Patidarang, all taken together, as much as one-third of the settled area was tenant-cultivated, mostly on a share-cropping basis. In south Kamrup, this proportion was

45. *Note on Land Transfer and Agricultural Indebtedness in India* (Govt. of India, 1895), pp. 66-67.

46. Detailed information, collected officially in 1888 from 42 randomly selected agricultural households of labouring people in Assam proper, reveal that half of them were indebted. Of the 21 indebted households, 7 had to sell labour in an attempt to redeem their debts. In 5 of these 7 cases, this took the shape of bonded labour. Traders or moneylenders advanced loans only in a few cases—"Conditions of the People of Assam", No. 10, pp. 1-92 in GI : *Proceedings of the Revenue and Agricultural Department for December 1888. Famine Reports on the Conditions of the Lower Classes of the Population in India, Nos. 1-24* (confidential), NAI.

one-fifth. On the other hand, in Sibsagar, only seven per cent of the settled area was sublet. There the rent was, by and large, paid in cash. Frequently, it did not exceed the land revenue rates paid by the landowners themselves. The latter derived profit from the labour services which the tenant was required by custom to provide. Besides, those tenants who tilled their plots with the owner's pair of bullocks had to work one day out of three on the latter's fields. The number of tenants in Sibsagar increased from 9,900 in 1891 to 21,500 in 1901. The Director of Land Records and Agriculture noted in 1888 a tendency in the most populous pockets towards accumulation of leases in the hands of non-cultivators who had a command over ready money. Most of them were the Government office clerks and pleaders of the district towns. The same official was puzzled to find that not many of the non-cultivating landowners were Marwari mer-chants.⁴⁷

Usurious merchant capital was more interested in seizing the crop for settlement of an advance, rather than in seizing the land. Hence, Marwaris did not feature as an important absentee landholding group. By the close of the century, planters also began to settle tenants on their surplus lands as a matter of policy.⁴⁸

The conditions of the peasantry really worsened very much in the period 1891-1901 because of a complex causation, already explained in a preceding section, and also due to a further rise in opium prices and the land revenue rates. The devastating earthquake of 1897, which caused the death of more than 1,500 people, added to their miseries.

'Raj' against the Raj : the 'Mel's

The impending enhancement of land revenue rates under the new settlement, as notified in 1892, led to a widespread dissatisfaction

47. Extract from the Report by H. Z. Darrah as reproduced in *Note on Land Transfer*..., n. 45, p. 67; also, *ibid*, pp. 234-5.

Phatikchandra Barooah, "Enquiries into the status of cultivating ryots in lakhiraj and nifkhiraj estates in Kamrup", dated 13 March 1883 to D. C., Kamrup (Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Govt. of Assam, Gauhati, Transcript No. 244) and its supplement (DHAS, Trans. No. 255); B. C. Allen, ed., *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. 4, Kamrup (1905), p. 166 and Vol. 7, Sibsagar (1906), pp. 169-70.

Writes Darrah on 22 May 1922: ".....subletting was not very common in the five valley districts and where most generally practised, e.g., in Kamrup district, the money rents paid by the tenants rarely exceeded the revenue payable to government"—*Assam Valley Re-assessment Report* (Govt. of Assam, August 1893), Appendix A—p. 44.

48. Griffiths, n. 32, pp. 302-3.

that rocked the rural society. While on a tour of the Brahmaputra Valley in the winter that year, the Chief Commissioner received "loud and numerous" complaints which "afforded a strong indication of the temper of the people". Ryots complained that because they had to pay to the Government an exorbitant price for opium, they were unable to pay the enhanced land revenue. The *Sarvajanik Sabha* of Jorhat had a series of meetings during the period from October 1892 to February 1893 to protest against the Government policy for an 'excessive increase of revenue'.⁴⁹

Under the new settlement, the population density and the demand for land in each village were the chief considerations in determining the land value and the rate to be fixed. The revised rates in the Brahmaputra Valley involved initially an enhancement of 53 per cent on the average; but in many villages it was as high as 70 to 100 per cent. Having at first refused to pay any heed to the public memorials on the issue, the Chief Commissioner, on a second thought, passed orders to reduce the increase in effect to an average 37 per cent. But the ryots demanded a postponement of the collection even at that reduced rate until the final orders of the Government of India on the pending appeals were received. But the Chief Commissioner disallowed any such postponement.⁵⁰ People in Kamrup and central Assam meanwhile spontaneously organised themselves once more into specially convened local *mels* to decide upon a no-rent campaign.⁵¹

The ryots discussed in these *mels* the increasing economic burden on them. They were already paying much higher prices for opium—a Government monopoly. Year after year, they had been pledging their crops to exploiting Marwari traders to get advances for paying the land revenue. Now the enhanced land revenue demand

49. Quotes from the evidence of J. J. S. Driberg in *Royal Commission on Opium, 1893*, Vol. 2 (London, 1894), p. 278; the last quote is from Jagannath Barooah's evidence, *ibid*, p. 299. Draft Rules for the re-assessment of land revenue rates in the Brahmaputra Valley were published to elicit public opinion in *Assam Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1892.

50. Gov.'s reply to Rashbehari Ghose. *Abstract of the Proceedings of the Council of Governor General of India, 1894*, Vol. 33 (Calcutta, 1895), pp. 317-9; *Hindoo Patriot*, 30 March and also 9 April 1894.

51. "The ordinary village panchayat, originally constituted as an authority on social matters, has developed into the *mel* or assembly not only of the members of a village, but of the whole of the inhabitants even one or more tahsils. The *mels* are governed by the leading Dolois or Gossains and by the principal landholders of the district."—R. B. McCabe, district magistrate of Kamrup to Commissioner, Home Dept. Progs. Public 1 (A): Assam Riots, No. 2-T, dated camp Rangiya, 12 Jan. 1894 under No. 112-A, April 1894 (NAI).

would push them further into the grip of usurious capital. Thus, caught into a vicious circle of intensified exploitation, they became agitated not only against the Government but also against the Marwari traders.⁵²

On 24 December 1893, the Rangiya Bazar was looted by a crowd of 200 to 250 people, mostly Kacharis. This happened immediately after the holding of a *mel* at the neighbouring village of Belagaon. Meanwhile similar *mels* were held throughout December and January in almost all *mauzas* in the compact thickly-populated area of north Kamrup. Everywhere the *mels* directed the people not to pay the enhanced rates. People demonstrated by thousands in and around Rangiya for several days. An armed police and military force was posted at Rangiya, with instructions to stop the people from demonstrating and to arrest their leaders. But they failed to do so. On 30 December, about three thousand people demonstrated against the unpopular measure and finally managed to disperse unscathed.

On 6 January 1894, the district magistrate himself came down to Rangiya with an additional force. Two days after, when a *mel* in session was reiterating the demands, the police were able to arrest fifteen persons. On 10 January, representatives of the people met the district magistrate. They demanded the release of their detained comrades and a postponement of the collection of land-revenue at the enhanced rates. Later, they decided to release their comrades forcibly the same evening. When some two to three thousand lathi-armed people were drawing close to the Thana, the district magistrate, after an infructuous attempt to disperse them by persuasion, ordered a firing. However, according to a report published in *Hindoo Patriot*, 5 February 1894, there was no loss of life at Rangiya. Government found it difficult to collect land revenue in the tahsils of Patidarrang, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali and in the *mauzas* of Upar Barbhag and Sarukhetri—all forming a compact block.

Meanwhile a reign of terror had been let loose. Notices were served on principal headmen of the area, under Section 17 of Act V of

52. The account of the peasant unrest as given here and below is mainly from K. N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Gauhati, 1958), pp. 30-35 and P. Raychaudhuri, "Uttar Kamrup aru Darangar krishak bid-roha" in *Pravaha* (In Assamese, Gauhati), 1, (No. 6-8, 1956), particularly pp. 407-10, unless stated otherwise. Though not properly documented, both sources are obviously based on official records—Home Dept. Progs. Public (A) : Assam Riots, April-Dec. 1894, (NAI) and press reports in *Hindoo Patriot*, 5 Feb. 1894, *Indian Nation* (Calcutta), 12 Feb. 1894, etc. We have checked these primary sources.

1861, to act as special constables for the preservation of peace. The ryot was told by the Raj: "If you do not pay, your property will be attached". The *raij* told him: "if you do pay, you are cursed and excommunicated".⁵³ People were further directed by the *raij* not to bid for purchase of attached properties put on auction. Disobedience was threatened with social boycott and excommunication, as well as imposition of fines.

After the incident of 10 January, a detachment of the 44th Gurkha Rifles, armed police units and the Volunteer Force were requisitioned to suppress the defiant people. The kutcherry of Rangiya was stockaded. All licensed guns in Rangiya, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali Tehsils—the storm centres—were seized. Respectable citizens over the entire affected area were forced into special constabulary. On 21 January, a group of ryots assaulted the *mauzadar* and the *mandal* when they tried to collect revenue at Lachima in Sarukhetri mauza. Seventy-five persons, arrested and detained in a Government rest-house in this connection, were forcibly released by a 3000-strong assembly of people. Next day the district magistrate himself arrived on the spot with a force of armed police. By 25 January, fifty-nine principal leaders were arrested and were forced to construct a make-shift lock-up for themselves. The same evening about six thousand people approached the district magistrate's camp there and presented a mass petition, signed by all of them, for release of the arrested persons. They finally dispersed after a bayonet charge was ordered.

The most tragic incident took place at Patharughat in the Mangaldoi subdivision on 28 January 1894. The district magistrate of Darrang went there with an armed force to suppress the agitation. Thousands of people who had rallied in anticipation of his arrival, squatted on the field facing the rest-house where he camped. The assembly refused to disperse unless their demands were met. A bayonet charge and volleys of firing followed, causing death to at least fifteen ryots and injury to many. They had to retreat of course before the superiority of arms, but not before they had answered back by throwing clods of earth and bamboo sticks. After these incidents, the

53. Same as n. 52.

The word RAIJ, in Assamese, means people in general or in the context of a particular locality. It is derived from the word RAJYA which meant an administrative or fiscal unit in some parts of medieval Assam. An Assamese proverb says: "the people are (your) sovereign and the clan, (your) Ganga" (*raijei raja, jnatiyei ganga*). Hence RAIJ MEL was much more than what we understand elsewhere by a village Panchayat,

resistance movement could not be kept up for long in the face of naked repression. Villagers were tortured and their properties were destroyed or looted. People had to pay the enhanced revenue.

Meanwhile the Government of India further reduced the overall initial increase of land revenue to a 32.7 per cent of the previous demand at the old rates under the pressure of the struggle. The same authorities also limited such enhancement for an individual holding to a maximum of about 50 per cent of the previous rental. This was no doubt a partial victory for the people. The echo of the robust voice of the *raij mels* was heard in 1894 in the Imperial Legislative Council itself, through the interpellation by Dr Rashbehari Ghose.⁵⁴

The widespread peasant struggle, based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating landowners, made an impact on the contemporary Assamese society. The non-cultivating landowners—Brahmins, Mahantas and Dolois, the traditional rural elite—apparently took the initiative and a leading role. But it was the poor peasantry and other sections of the rural poor, including the artisans, who actually lent it a militant character. One of the militant artisans, Pusparam Kanhar, is still remembered, *inter alia* by the bell-meta! workers of Sarukhetri *mauza* to have undergone a term of imprisonment.⁵⁵

It may be noted that in the disturbed *mauzas* and tahsils, tenants constituted a large proportion of the population and held in occupation some one-third of the settled area. The landowners apprehended that it would be difficult to shift the burden of the enhancement in land revenue rates on to the shoulders of their tenants. They feared that their profits as middlemen would therefore be cut down. This consideration pushed them into the agitation. But afraid of a loss of property under attachment orders, they did not continue their resistance long.⁵⁶ Indeed they were the first to retreat.

54. See n. 50. To commemorate the Patharughat incident, a local village poet composed a ballad in Assamese, *Dalipuran*. For a reference see Dineswar Sharma, *Patharughatar Ran* (In Assamese, Mangaldoi, 1957). pp. 1-28. The land revenue demand in the Brahmaputra Valley increased from Rs. 32,64,605 in 1892-93 to Rs. 43,50,170 in 1893-94.—*Report of the Administration of the Province of Assam for the year 1893-94* (Shillong, 1894), p. 122.
55. Information collected by *Assam Kanhar Sangha* of Sarthebari which was founded on 5 Nov. 1933 and registered as a co-operative society in 1938-39. Another notable leader was Jainaram Dev Goswami of Vyaskuchi, a landlord.
56. McCabe to Assam Valley Commissioner, camp Rangiya, 12 Jan. 1894, GI : Home Dept. Progs. Public 1 (A) : 'Assam Riots', No. 2-T, n. 51.

Opium of the People

As the monopoly sale of opium by the Government at an exorbitant price was a continued means to fleece the peasant, it needs a detailed discussion. The professed official policy was one of progressive restriction of the opium evil through a gradual enhancement of the sale price and a decrease in the number of licensed opium shops. Accordingly, the number of shops in the province was gradually brought down from 5,137 in 1873-74 to 1,397 in 1880-81, 775 in 1901-02 and 728 by 1905-06. The Treasury price was also increased from Rs. 26 per *seer* in 1880-81 to Rs. 32 in the years 1883-89 and Rs. 37 in the years 1890-91 to 1908-09. The resultant decrease in the province's consumption of opium was apparently 23.5 per cent while the increase in its total opium revenue was 10 per cent between 1880-81 and 1900-01 (Appendix 4).

The achievement was not much. In Assam proper, an exceptionally high per capita opium consumption persisted. As much as 1,557 maunds out of the provincial consumption of 1,686 maunds in 1880-81 and 1,201 maunds out of 1,291 maunds in 1900-01 were consumed there alone. The 18 per cent decline in consumption there was partly due to a 7.7 per cent decrease in the opium-addicted indigenous population itself. In other words, the actual per capita consumption of opium there decreased to the tune of only about 11 per cent in twenty years. One could suspect that the Government was guided purely by revenue considerations rather than by a welfare outlook. There was a continuous increase of the opium consumption again since 1897-98, while the selling price was kept unchanged at Rs. 37 per *seer* for 19 years till 1908-09. The total consumption in Assam proper was at its lowest in 1897-98 (1,128 maunds) and 1901-02 (1,126 maunds), but it again recorded an increasing trend that persisted until the Non-Cooperation movement of 1921-22 (Appendix 4). Opium was the most important source of provincial revenue, next only to the land revenue collection. A maund of opium would have cost the Treasury Rs. 290 at the ex-factory cost in 1883-84, but it brought forth a gross revenue of Rs. 1,040, when sold at Rs. 26 per *seer*.⁵⁷ It was a gold mine for the Government, not to be lightly surrendered. The Government opium policy was therefore one of maximising the revenue through a system of monopoly pricing.

57. *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1884-85, p. 71. The ex-factory cost price for opium was Rs. 7-4 annas per *seer* until 1 June 1895.
Bengal Ad. Rep., 1872-73, n. 16, p. 292 n; Driberg, n. 49, p. 454.

The policy hit the opium-addicted Assamese peasant hard not only morally, but also economically. During the years 1874-1905, the habit of taking the drug in its most harmful form, i.e. smoking, had rapidly increased, raising the proportion of smokers from an initial estimated 5 to 10 per cent to about 50 per cent of the addicts. Opium smoking had become a congregational religious ritual (*kani-va seva*), eating into the very core of the Assamese society.⁵⁸ The enhancement of price from time to time still kept the drug within the reach of the peasant, as if only to squeeze him more. Although the Government sold the drug to vendors at Rs. 37 per *seer*, the retail price was Rs. 45 to Rs. 50, the margin going to the middlemen. Between 1873 and 1893, the retail price had increased two to three-fold. According to the evidence of a pleader of Nowgong before the Royal Commission on Opium in 1893, lower classes generally spent from 10 to 20 per cent of their income on opium.⁵⁹ Not only the increased land revenue rates but also the 12.5 per cent enhancement of opium price in 1890-91 was a contributing factor that had led to widespread discontent.

Beside the Government, some planters and traders also allured the Assamese peasants with opium to gain economic advantages. For example, S. E. Peal, a planter, told the Royal Commission on Opium that for some ten to twelve years since 1863, he used to issue regularly about 40 lbs. of the drug every month to his labour—and this constituted half of the wage bill—to serve as circulating media over an area of 200 sq. miles wherefrom his Assamese labour were recruited. Another planter, E. P. Gilman, also told the Commission that he used to sell opium to Assamese villagers. Haribilas Agarwala (1842-1916), an Indian planter, ran a lucrative opium shop, although he too recommended to the Government a policy of gradual eradication of the evil.⁶⁰ As long as opium was not a contraband commodity and money put into it paid dividends, there was no dearth of distributors for the drug—white or black.

FURTHER GROWTH OF MODERN POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Modest Growth of a Middle Class

Ever since the restoration of Assamese as a recognised language,

58. ACOER, n. 24, p. 40.

59. Evidence of R. D. Mazumdar, pleader, and J. D. Anderson, D. C. of Darrang, in *R. C. on Opium, 1893*, Vol. 2, n. 49, pp. 62 and 281, respectively.

60. Relevant evidences, *ibid.* pp. 153, 266 and 293.

the Assamese intelligentsia became increasingly self-confident and sought self-expression through organised literary and political activities. Half a dozen of young scholars, who had their early education in the Gauhati High School during the sixties, startled everybody with the successful careers they achieved for themselves.

Anundoram Barua (1850-1889) was the fifth Indian and the first Assamese ever to be a member of the Indian Civil Service.⁶¹ Like him Bolinarayan Bora (1852-1927), too, competed for Gilchrist Scholarship in Calcutta in 1872 and, after completing his training in England, joined the Engineering Service. Zalnur Ali Ahmed (1848-1931) and Sibram Bora (1847-1907) joined the Indian Medical Service. Manik Chandra Barooah started his business career as a timber and tea merchant and settled down after the meteoric rise and fall of his business, as a modest planter. However, such a rich crop was not repeatedly harvested. Opportunities were extremely limited as compared to Bengal, and the aspiring Assamese students had to go all the way to Calcutta for their higher education. Of the 938 students matriculating from the Calcutta University in 1872, only four were from the schools of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the First Arts Examination the same year, as against 81 from Bengal, 11 from Bihar and 1 from Orissa, none out of the five candidates from the Brahmaputra Valley schools did come out successful.⁶²

These results provided a plea for closing down the First Arts classes which had been there at the Gauhati School from 1866 to 1875. No opportunity of college education was left any more in the province until a college was founded at Sylhet in 1892 and yet another at Gauhati in 1901. Even school education made a very slow progress. Around 1887, while as much as Rs. 18,000 were spent annually on the lone European Inspector heading the education department, a sum of only Rs. 19,000 was spent by the provincial Government on the high schools. With a frail and narrow educational infrastructure, the annual out-turn of educated personnel was naturally small. In 1881 only 14 Assamese boys matriculated from schools in Assam proper. Even as late as 1898 and 1899, students matriculating from the schools of the Brahmaputra Valley numbered only 32 and 51, respectively. During the 12 years preceding 1900,

61. Gajnafar Ali Khan (1872-1959) and Gurusaday Datta (1882-1941), both of Sylhet, entered the Indian Civil Service in 1897 and 1905, respectively.

62. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1872-73, n. 16, pp. 432 and 436.

altogether 29 residents of the same Valley obtained their B.A. degrees against 68 of the Surma Valley. In 1905-06 there were 52 students in the Cotton College, Gauhati, as against 63 in the Murari-chand College of Sylhet.⁶³ Out of 1,346 boys and girls who matriculated from schools of Assam during the years 1882-99, 335 (25%) were natives of the Brahmaputra Valley, 629 (47%) of the Surma Valley and 382 (28%) were those who were natives of other provinces.⁶⁴

The provincial administration was not prepared to build up an appropriate educational infrastructure for the simple reason that it could recruit Bengal's surplus educated personnel to staff its offices at the minimum cost. Hence, the shortage of educated indigenous personnel in the Brahmaputra Valley persisted. The share of the other Valley and outsiders to the province in Government jobs remained disproportionately large, and many of the new vacancies continued to be filled every year with recruits from neighbouring Bengal. The handful of educated Assamese youth apparently faced no problem of unemployment as such during the nineteenth century. Even those who lacked sufficient formal education could look forward to clerical and labour supervisory jobs in the expanding tea gardens, the steamer company, the railways and the post and telegraph communications, if they had so chosen. But the under-employed rural youth made only limited use of these opportunities. Besides, employers often discriminated against them because of their alleged addiction to opium. Appointments to near-hereditary *mauzadarship* were, on the other hand, almost exclusive reserves of the local rural gentry. Numbering about a thousand, the village *mandals* formed the lower echelons of this rural society.

A band of educated youngmen, attracted towards modern business in the last quarter of the century, no doubt contributed to eventual bourgeois formations in Assamese society, but their stunted progress needs a detailed discussion. Medieval Assam had very limited trading activities and hence lacked well-developed trading castes. The only vigorous trading elements, early in the nineteenth century, were the peasant-traders of Barpeta and Sualkuchi who plied their boats laden with mustard as far down as Bengal or hawked their

63. Bolinrayan Bora, "Uccashiksha", *Mau*, 1 (Jan. 1887) and also (March 1887); *East Bengal and Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1905-06, n. 8, p. 165; *Friend of India*, 23 January 1882; *Imp. Gaz. of India*, Vol. 6, n. 17, p. 102.

64. *The Golden Jubilee Volume Cotton College* (Gauhati, 1951-52), App. C II. The available figures do not cover the years 1884 and 1889.

handicrafts in Assam villages. Members of fishermen's caste (Nadial) were engaged in petty trade, e.g., the retailing of fish, betel-nuts and betel-leaves, lime etc.⁶⁵

But such elements were not of much significance. Modern bourgeois formation in Assam did not emerge from them. On the contrary, they lost their independence to Marwari trading capital, in due course. Generally, it was from the higher caste-groups with a background of modern education that the first stratum of an Assamese business community was drawn. They were generally from land-owning and/or service-holders' and lawyers' families. Investments in a tea garden or two particularly suited them, because certain features of tenant-exploitation could also be carried over into the realm of tea production. There were, according to Jagannath Barooah, 'two to three dozen native' planters in his Valley towards the close of the century.⁶⁶ Our Appendix 5 represents a cross-section of the Assamese middle class of the last quarter of the century and their respective backgrounds. Some of them employed wage-labour to a considerable extent, and their production activities were market-oriented. Others, not necessarily involved in any production activities, were nevertheless precursors of an ideology congenial to accumulation and of new values oriented to capitalism. The bourgeois stratum that was emerging was enlightened as well as enterprising, and it provided leadership, however tenuous it might be, to the Assamese society in every field.

Its existence at the fringe of the vast economic empire that British capital had built in Assam was, however, precarious. More than ninety per cent of the total acreage in the thousand and odd tea gardens belonged to British owners. In terms of capital invested or wage-labour employed, the British share upto World War I was even higher—almost one hundred per cent. Local capitalists, extremely poor in resources as they were, tried to develop their business activities, not in competition but in co-operation with the British and, like

65. Capt. Francis Jenkins, "*Journal of a tour in Upper Assam, 1838*" (DHAS, Trans. Vol. 18, No. 122), pp. 56-7, on Nadial traders. According to the *Imp. Gaz. of India*, Vol. 6, n. 17, p. 76, a considerable share of the trade in mustard also for markets outside the province was still in the hands of a class of traders who were natives of Kamrup, but the rest of the inter-provincial trade and nearly the whole of the import traffic of the Brahmaputra Valley were carried on by the Marwari traders. The tea market was almost entirely in British hands.

66. Evidence of J. Barooah, *R. C. on Opium, 1893*, Vol. 2, n. 49, p. 296.

many other sections of the Indian bourgeoisie, they had comprador origins to begin with.⁶⁷ It was difficult to accumulate and get investment opportunities, without cultivating servile contacts with Britishers in administration and business. This explains their basic faith, until the end of World War I, in the benevolence of British rule. Their political vision ranged from a blind loyalty to moderate constructive criticism. As landowners, they were nevertheless opposed to the policy of progressive enhancement of land revenue and envied the still bigger European planter-landowners, who had to pay practically nothing towards land revenue.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the small band of enlightened Assamese businessmen continued to break fresh grounds for themselves. Bholanath Barooah (1853-1923), a close relation of Manik, started his career as the manager of the latter's timber business and later rose to be an independent millionaire timber merchant of Orissa with his head office in Calcutta. Dinanath Bezbarua (1813-95) established two small tea gardens. One of his sons left for South America to make his career there. The other son, Lakshmi Nath Bezbarua (1868-1938), after his graduation and marriage into the famous Tagore family of Calcutta, settled down in timber business outside Assam, first as a partner of Bholanath and, later, independently. Of Anandaram Dhekial-Phukan's two sons, one settled abroad and the other, Anandaram, was a partner (until his death in 1884) in the business concern of Manik Chandra, styled Barooah Phukan Bros. (1875-84). Hemadhar Barooah (d. 1871) and his graduate son, Jagannath Barooah, devoted their energies in developing their own tea gardens. Even the devout scholar, Anundoram Barua, dreamt of purchasing a tea garden after his retirement from the Indian Civil Service. He had accumulated not less than Rs. 40,000 by the time of his premature death. Gunabhiram Barua left behind a legacy of Rs. 50,000. Thus, one finds that the newly educated were not initially allergic to business or accumulation. A few Assamese-owned small printing presses and newspapers also were there, in which leading men like Manik Chandra Barooah, Hemchandra Barua and Radhanath Changkakati (1853-1923) had put their money. Incidentally, Hemchandra, too, left behind a modest legacy (See Appendix 5).

67. Many petty Assamese planters, e. g., had no factories to process their tea leaves. They sent their leaves to neighbouring European gardens which had factories.

It was the paucity of capital and, even more, of opportunities under the domination of British and comprador Marwari capital in different fields of business that ultimately killed this spirit. For example, one of the early Assamese pioneers in tea, Gangaram Sharma, lost both his gardens to European rivals. One of them had to be sold under duress in 1892-93 to settle a dispute with the neighbouring European garden over the right of the way. The other was acquired through foul means by the Jhanjee Tea Company, also under British ownership.⁶⁸

Most of these businessmen were closely associated with the literary and political activities of their day and were integrally connected with the rural peasant community at large. Early political organisations were, therefore, broad-based common platforms of the ryots, i.e., the assesseees of land revenue, even though the leadership was almost limited to their enlightened section. A number of such organisations sprang up, and some of them pre-dated even the Indian National Congress.

The example of the Bengal ryots was too obvious an influence on the wave of politically-oriented ryot meetings that were held all over Assam, even in 'sundry places'.⁶⁹ The centres of this new wave were however the so-called towns. The Jorhat *Sarvajanik Sabha* was reportedly founded in 1875, at the initiative of Jagannath Barooah. He was its vice-president for six consecutive years from 1887 to 1892 and president since 1893. Devicharan Barua (1864-1926), a lawyer and planter, was its secretary for about seventeen years since about 1890. How skin-deep was the concern of these gentlemen for the welfare of the ryots is of course indicated by the memorial they submitted on behalf of the *Sabha* to the Royal Commission on Opium in November 1893. The memorialists were against an immediate prohibition of opium sales on the plea that

"The people of this province are not able and would not be willing to make up by the contribution of other taxes, any deficit in the revenues of the province caused by such measures".

They dreaded that, as landowners, they would have to pay a much

68. Krishnanath Sharma, *Krishna Sharmar Diary* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1972), pp. 7 and 9.

69. *Mau*, 1, (Jan. 1887) cited by Bora, n. 13, pp. 53-54. G. Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*, Vol. 1 (1917-29) (N. Delhi/Bombay, 1970), pp. 2-4.

heavier amount towards land revenue, if opium was prohibited.⁷⁰

The Tezpur Ryot *Sabha* was established around 1884, at the initiative of the new elite. Amongst its founders were Haribilas Agarwala—a merchant planter of Assamese birth from his mother's side, Lakshmikanta Barkakati—the manager of his saw-mills and Lambodar Bora (1860-92)—a lawyer. Organised primarily to protest against an enhancement of land-revenue, this Ryot *Sabha* had a wide base in the villages. It collected small subscriptions from hundreds of peasants and in 1887 built the Tezpur Town Hall, the first of its kind in Assam. By 1886 the Shillong Association, the Nowgong Ryot *Sabha* (Association) and the Upper Assam Associations came into being. The last-mentioned body, according to Radhanath Changkakati, their secretary at least during the years 1887-1893, was composed of ryots of the area to represent popular grievances and protest against any enhancement or fresh imposition of taxes. These co-ordinated associations had sprung up all over the districts of Sib-sagar and Lakhimpur.⁷¹

Thus, by and large, the new elite made a united front with the proprietary peasants on all common issues against the rulers. However, there were some like Bolinarayan Bora who frowned upon this fraternisation. Even while sharing the moderate political views of his celebrated father-in-law, R. C. Dutt, Bora had a more conservative and pro-British bent of mind. Although a first-rate intellect, who possessed a deep understanding of the basic malady of the Assamese society, this engineer wasted his energies in aping the English ways of life and making expensive trips to Europe. Denied legitimate promotion in service and superseded by a European junior, he finally went into premature retirement and quietly settled down in Calcutta. Nevertheless, Assam owes him a debt, for he was the first person to initiate political discussion on an intellectual plane, through his short-lived Assamese periodical—*Mau* (1886-87).

“Those restless Assamese youngmen who, in quest of celebrity and aping the Bengalees, carry on unintelligible political movements

70. “Memorial of Jorhat Sarvajanic Sabha”, dated 11 Nov. 1893, reproduced as Appendix 9 in this book. Evidence of J. Barooah in *R. C. on Opium, 1893* Vol. 2, n. 49. pp. 296-7.

There is some confusion about the date of establishment of the Sabha. The year 1875 is suggested by P. Goswami, *Manikcandra Barua aru teonr yug* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1970), p. 48ⁿ. The more probable date is 1884.

71. Dutt, n. 52, p. 36; our Appendix 6; Radhanath Changkakati's evidence before the *R. C. on Opium, 1893*, Vol. 2, n. 49, p. 305. Omeo Kumar Das, “Jiivan-Smriti”, *Manidip*, 6 (No. 10, August 1966), p. 688.

by calling together the peasants, would do real good to the cause of the country", observed *Mau* in an anonymous comment in February 1887, "... if they dedicate half of the energy to the promotion of higher education in this province". In another article published in January the same year, a sarcastic attack was launched on the organisers of such meetings who were described as "a few unemployed cunning youths, eager to make a name for themselves", by delivering long speeches, adopting a few resolutions and then sending a petition to the Chief Commissioner. As to the outcome of such meetings, the opinion expressed was that

"The poor peasant remains as wise as he was when he came to the meeting; his only gain is the loss of the four ploughing days lost in coming and going and annas two paid towards the sending of the petition. Such as a matter of fact, are the origin and functions of the peasant meetings of Assam."⁷²

Although motivated by a pro-Government attitude, the above comments had no doubt an element of truth in them. For the educated middle class elements had no action-oriented programme of agitation and could not take the popular discontent outside the channel of petition-making. In areas where these modern Ryot Sabhas and associations were in the field, no militant mass struggles on the lines of the *Raij Mels* (1893-94) ever took place. Nevertheless, even these institutions were useful in their early stage as organised platforms for the spread of modern political consciousness and the development of nationalism. That is why they attracted an attack from the conservative quarters.

It was in the wake of these local associations that the Assamese middle class began to act in terms of a valley-wide political organisation—the Assam Association. An Association with this name was active in 1882 with its headquarters at Sibsagar. It asked the Chief Commissioner in that year for a copy of the proposed Assam Land Tenure Bill with a view to offer comments on it. The Sibsagar public's concern over this bill was duly reported in the Calcutta press. However, it was in 1903 that the Assam Association was formed afresh on a firm and really wider basis, with Manik Chandra Barooah as its secretary, Raja Prabhatchandra Barua of Gauripur as its president and Jagannath Barooah as its vice-president. Other important

72. Extracts, respectively, from *Mau*, 1, (Feb. 1887) and 1, (Jan. 1887) as reproduced in translation by Bora, n. 13, pp. 55 and 60-61.

personalities like Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1853-1936)—a Brahmo convert and Radhanath Changkakati, the editor and founder of the *Times of Assam* (estd. 1895) were also among its founders. The Association held its first general session at Dibrugarh, under the presidency of Raja Prabhatchandra Barua in April 1905.⁷³ A new phase of constitutional agitation in Assam was ushered in thereby.

Impact of National Congress

In the Congress session at Calcutta in 1886, four Assamese delegates were present. One of them—Kalikanta Barakakati—represented the Shillong Association. Devicharan Barua and Gopinath Bardoloi, both graduates, represented the Upper Assam Associations and Satyanath Borah (1860-1925), also a graduate, the Nowgong Ryot Association. In the Madras Congress session of 1887, Radhanath Changkakati represented the Upper Assam Associations and Lakshmikanta Barkakati the Tezpur Ryot *Sabha*. The former attended the Congress session for the second time at Allahabad in 1892 as a delegate alongside Bholanath Barooah and L. N. Bezbarua. Bezbarua was a delegate also to the Madras, Bombay and Calcutta sessions in 1903, 1904 and 1906, respectively (Appendix 6).

Among other delegates from the Brahmaputra Valley attending the Congress sessions during the years 1888-1905 were Ghanasyam Barua of the Nowgong Ryot Association (1888); H. Singha Chaudhuri, zamindar of Bagribari (1888); Manik Chandra Barooah (1890); Meghnath Banerjee—a medical practitioner of Jaypur (1891); Hariprasad Nath—a *mukhtear* of Goalpara (1901); Chandrakamal Bezbarua—a planter of Jorhat (1904) and Bhabanikanta Das, a pleader of Dhubri (1904). Similarly, delegates from the Surma Valley also attended most of these sessions during the years 1885-1905. Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932), Kamini Kumar Chanda (1862-1936), Sundarimohan Das (1857-1950) and Ramani Mohan Das (1873-1930) were the most prominent among them (see Appendices 6 and 7).

There is evidence that the early Indian National Congress sessions created an enthusiasm among the middle classes throughout Assam. For example, on 16 December 1886, there was a well-attended

73. *Friend of India*, 28 March 1882 and Goswami, n. 70, p. 52. There is some confusion over the exact date of the founding of the new Assam Association. We have followed Goswami. It is possible that Gangagovinda Phukan was the founder of an earlier, and lately defunct, organisation with the same name.

meeting at Murarichand College of Sylhet which was participated, among others, by Sundarimohan Das and Ramani Mohan Das. The meeting resolved that it had become necessary, alike in the interests of India and England, to reconstitute the Legislative Councils with no less than two-third members elected by local bodies and with the right of interpellation. It also demanded that the maximum age of a candidate for the Indian Civil Service examination be raised to 23 years and that the said examination be held simultaneously in India and England. The chairman of a public meeting in Shillong and the Indian Committee of Dibrugarh sent greeting telegrams to the 1886 Congress in session. The achievement of this session was reviewed in *Mau* in its February 1887 issue. It was commented that as too many weighty resolutions were on the agenda, sufficient time had not been devoted to an analysis and examination of each of them. Nevertheless the assemblage, the expression of friendship therein and the urge for a common object, in spite of differences of race and religion, were highlighted as unique signs of "India's unity". The readers were reminded that "English education and British rule are at the root of the birth of this unity" and also that the British rule would be necessary for a long time for the good of India. British officers should continue in the civil service, but it was not a bad idea to Indianise half of the civil service for the present.⁷⁴

The real character of *Mau* came out when it lent support to European planters on the indentured coolie question. Ever since the late sixties, the Bengal press was carrying on an incessant campaign against the oppression of the coolies. In 1879, Ram Kumar Vidyaratna, a Bengali Brahmo missionary, made risky trips to Assam to gather first-hand information on the conditions of the coolies and published a series of telling reports. Later in 1886, Dwarkanath Ganguli, another Brahmo missionary and assistant secretary of the Indian Association of Calcutta, went to the Brahmaputra Valley and brought back horrifying reports, which were serialised in *Sanjivani* (Calcutta) under the pen-name of "Son of Legni". In an article published in *Somprakash* of Calcutta, the same year, the Act of 1882 was condemned. "Oh, residents of Bengal and Assam" it was asked

74. Newspapers cited in the *Report of the Second Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta, 1886*, p. 144.
Quote from *Mau*, 1, (Feb. 1887) as reproduced by Bora, n. 13, p. 58; also *ibid*, pp. 59-60.

"can't you crush the vanity of the white planters by killing this Coolie Act"?⁷⁵

It was these press reports which provoked *Mau* to come out with venomous comments against the agitation, in three out of its four issues during the year 1886-87. In course of a six-page anonymous article, it drew up a list of benefits which the plantation workers supposedly derived from their European employers. For this role, the Calcutta mouth-piece of British capital, the *Englishman*, showered praise on the periodical. However, this reactionary view of *Mau* was not shared by the Assamese middle class in general. The Assamese students of Calcutta whose "minds had already been turned red in the furnace of the political ideology of the new Congress"—writes L. N. Bezbarua in his autobiography—reacted sharply to this pro-planter stance. He got his letter published in *Mau*, vindicating the noble role of the Bengal press and exposing the evils of the labour recruitment system. It need not be mentioned that the editor disagreed with his view.⁷⁶

While opposing a resolution recommending the extension of the system of trial by jury all over India, Devicharan Barua, a delegate from Assam at the Calcutta Congress (1886), pointed out that it had already proved injurious in Assam in all cases involving Europeans

"because the majority on the jury list are Europeans, and they are selected from a class of men strong in race prejudices and ignorant of the first principles of jurisprudence—I mean the class of the planters ... and this very system is one of the reasons why our poor coolies are so oppressed in Assam".⁷⁷ (Emphasis ours.)

Despite pressure from the ranks, no resolution could be moved on the question of Assam coolies in the early Congress annual sessions, e.g. in the Madras session of 1887, because of technical jurisdictional difficulties. However since 1896, the Congress annual sessions started demanding the repeal of all penal labour legislation for Assam. While reiterating the same in 1901, the Congress regretted that

75. Chattopadhyay, n. 69, p. 4.

76. Quote from *Somprakash*, n. 33, 11 *shravan*, 1293 (1886 A.D.), pp. 461-2. "Cah bagicar coolie" in *Mau*, 1, (Dec. 1886), pp. 10-16; L. N. Bezbarua's letter, *ibid*, (Feb. 1887).

L. N. Bezbarua, *Mor Jivan Sonvaran* (In Assamese, Jorhat, 1966), pp. 77-78. Quote from the same (translation ours).

77. Quote from the same (translation ours).
77. *Report of the Second Indian National Congress*, n. 74, p. 84.

immediate effect had not been given even to the Government's own proposal to enhance the coolies' wages.⁷⁸

The desire for participation in the legislative process was also growing in the minds of the Assamese middle class men. While supporting Surendra Nath Banerjea's resolution, containing tentative suggestions for the expansion and Indianisation of the Council System, Devicharan Barua, in the same Calcutta Congress, said that the introduction of "a representative system in some form" was as urgently required in Assam as in other provinces. Claiming to speak on behalf of the entire people of Assam, he said—

"Allowing freely that our rulers, foreigners and strangers as they are to all that most intimately affects us, are actuated by the highest motives and do their best for us, the present state of the country, and the universal feeling that pervades it, sufficiently show that neither the purity of their intentions nor the consciousness of their efforts can compensate for that want of political sympathy with and detailed knowledge of the circumstances of our case, which only our own people, carefully selected by ourselves, can supply. (Loud cheers)."⁷⁹

It is thus clear that the founding of the National Congress in 1885 was not a mere handiwork of a few British and Indian gentlemen at the top. Evidently, it was a response of the Indian middle classes to the new national awakening. Assamese middle classes were no exception as they reacted similarly. Progressive Indianisation of the civil service, abolition of European racial practices, further democratisation of the Legislative Councils and their extension to new areas, repeal of the repugnant penal provisions of the indentured labour Acts,—all these demands and an unflinching faith in the growing unity of India echoed and re-echoed. Equality with Europeans under a potentially benevolent British rule was what the articulate Indian middle classes aspired for, for many years to come.

Westernisation and Sanskritisation

It is significant that, in the nineteenth century, the enlightened

78. *Proc. of the Indian National Congress, 17th Session*, n. 28, Resolution No. 13, p. 164. No resolution on Assam tea labour was allowed to be moved at the early Indian National Congress Sessions, on the plea that it was a provincial, and not a national, issue. However, the Bengal Provincial Conference, meeting annually since 1888, always took sympathetic interest in the problems of Assam coolies.

79. *Report of the Second Indian National Congress*, n. 74, pp. 109-10.

section of the Assamese middle class welcomed a large scale immigration of productive labour and skill from other provinces into its Valley and did not suffer from a 'xenophobia' of the later periods. It was convinced that no economic progress was feasible unless the then depopulated condition was restored to normalcy.

Gunabhiram Barua estimated that no less than a million people could easily be settled from outside on the wide acres of Assam. He enumerated three factors which were favourable to such immigration. These were: (i) cheapness and fertility of the land, (ii) attractive earnings for skilled labour and craftsmen in view of the local manpower shortage and (iii) the prevailing conditions of easy matrimony into local families. He wrote a long article in 1885 to discuss, in this perspective, the Bengali-Assamese relations, which were already tending to develop into a love-and-hate spectrum. He noted that, whether desirable or not, the Bengali babu or *bhadralok* had become the model for the growing Assamese middle class. The acculturation that was going on—he suggested (though not in so many words)—was but a simultaneous process of westernisation and sanskritisation. Traditional Assamese dress, hair-do, manners, culinary art and even other forms of culture—all had begun to undergo rapid changes in the townships under Anglo-Bengali influence. People like Gunabhiram and Bolinarayan, on the whole, hailed such changes as inevitable and necessary.⁸⁰

But all changes were not considered necessarily beneficial. As early as 1847, Dhekial-Phukan had particularly noted the rigour of the caste-system as a hindrance to production in the contemporary Bengali society. The traditional caste-system in Assam did not go that far and used to function less rigorously in this respect.⁸¹ But now the aping of the Bengali ways of life tended to introduce this rigour in Assam as well. The Assamese Brahmin's rigidity against widow remarriage was extended further by the model set by the Bengali caste-Hindu elite (several non-Brahmin castes of Bengal did not have the

80. Editorial article "Bengali" in *Assam Bandhu*, 1 (No. 3, 1885), pp. 95-100 and "Amar manuh", *ibid.*, (No. 4, 1885), pp. 133-5. Also see Anonymous, "Asamiya aru Bangali" in *Mau*, 1 (Jan. 1887), pp. 49-52 and "Tirutar ban ki", *ibid.*, (Dec. 1886), pp. 1-2. Bolinarayan appears to be the author of these articles in *Mau*. For the concepts of westernisation and sanskritisation as used by M. N. Srinivas, see his *Social Change in Modern India* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1966), *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritisation* (Mimeographed, University of Delhi, 1966) and "Note on Sanskritisation and Westernisation", *Far Eastern Quarterly*, (No. 4, 1956).

81. Anandaram Dhekial-Phukan, "Inglandar bivarān", *Arunoday*, (No. 4, April 1847), p. 48. Lakshmiram Bora, comp., *Asamar Sankshep Itihas: A Brief History of Assam for Children* (Gauhati, 1875) pp. 67-68.

practice of widow re-marriage). Even the Kalitas—a dominant peasant caste of Assam which had no such traditional prejudice—began to take a stand against widow re-marriages. Theories were invented to establish that the Kalita was identical with the Kayastha or even the Kshatriya.⁸² Similarly, the simple rites of marriage practised by non-Brahmins at popular level were being progressively replaced by elaborate *sastric* rituals, presided over by Brahmin priests.

Thus, the social change in nineteenth-century Assam was, more or less, modelled on the immigrant Bengali caste Hindu society of the time—with all its virtues and vices. The latter society itself was passing through the twin processes of westernisation and sanskritisation, acting upon and often conflicting with each other. An understanding of these dimensions of social development and the intricacies of multi-form relationships between the two dominant linguistic groups competing for jobs and positions of power will be essential for comprehending the struggle for self-government that unfolded itself in course of the next half-century.

Under the constant shadow of the Bengali-Assamese conflict, the growth of nationalism in 19th century Assam was a two-track process. People were increasingly turning as much to the great nationalism at the all-India level as to the little nationalism at the linguistic-regional level.⁸³ It was through these twin processes, more often complementary than conflicting, that nationalism in India did project itself as a viable challenge to imperialism.

82. For example, Dutta Narayan, father of Bolinarayan Bora—though a Kalita—wore “the sacred thread (*oot-tori*)”. Bora, n. 13, pp. 1-3. “*Oot-tori*” is not exactly the sacred thread, but is said to be its legacy—a close substitute.

83. Broadly speaking, great nationalism suited the interests of the still incipient big bourgeoisie of India, while little nationalism was related to the small bourgeoisie—the regional middle classes. Indian nationalism developed through a process of merger between the two. This will be further discussed in the last chapter of this book.

First Taste of Council Government 1906-20

EASTERN BENGAL AND ASSAM UNDER A LT. GOVERNOR 1906-12

Operation Partition and Swadeshi

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, a partition of Bengal was imminent. In 1892, some officials in the foreign department suggested that the Chittagong Division of Bengal be transferred to Assam. When the idea was discussed in details at the official level during 1896-97, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam further suggested that the districts of Dacca and Mymensingh be also transferred along with the Chittagong Division. The planters, in particular, desired a re-drawing of the provincial boundaries with a view to having the port of Chittagong and the plantations of North Bengal and Assam included in one and the same province. When Curzon visited Assam in 1903, they put into his head the idea that if Chittagong was tagged to Assam and developed as an outlet to the sea, the prohibitive transport cost of tea could be substantially reduced. In the following year, Chief Commissioner Fuller also briefed him as to the administrative necessity of enlarging the size of Assam, without which no experienced senior civilian was likely to opt for it. These considerations were buttressed by the European civilians' general desire to aim a blow at the Bengali middle class—the mainstay of the rising Congress movement, and dislocate it in a vital part of its sphere of influence. The creation of a Muslim-majority province on the flank of Bengal, which could take care of all these considerations, thus became a political necessity. Bengal was partitioned in face of

the fiercest opposition that the Government had encountered ever since 1857.¹

Assam's status as a separate province also came to an end on 16 October 1905, and Fuller was promoted as the first Lieutenant Governor of the new-born composite province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Available official and private papers leave no doubt that one major objective of the Curzon Plan was "to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule".²

The anti-partition agitation was meanwhile in full swing in Bengal and the Surma Valley. The call to boycott British goods echoed throughout the Bengali-speaking areas and inspired the cult of swadeshi all over India. A major section of the Muslim landlords and middle classes, however, were won over by Curzon in favour of this Operation Partition and Assam's merger with Eastern Bengal. They had found the mainstream of nationalism to be heavily loaded with the Hindu spiritual content. Bipin Chandra Pal was openly asserting the Hindu might and exhorting the young Hindus to take to lathis. All positions of power, as could be reached by Indians under the given colonial set-up, were practically monopolised by the caste-Hindus in Bengal. This fact was used to sow seeds of communal distrust. The prospect of Muslims out-numbering the Bengali Hindus in the new province had its appeal to the former. Fuller openly declared that Muslims would be the favoured community in the new province.³

As an offshoot of the boycott movement, national schools sprang up all over Bengal and the Surma Valley. The first Surma Valley Political Conference, held on 11-12 August 1906 at Sylhet under the presidency of K. K. Chanda, was addressed by Pal. In a students' rally at Sylhet addressed by him on 16 August 1906, about forty school boys declared their intention to quit the Government school.

1. B. B. Mazumdar, *Indian Political Associations and Reform of Legislature 1818-1917* (Calcutta, 1965), p. 360. A. Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge in India between 1890-1910* (Calcutta, 1967), pp. 93-103. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 1-20.
2. Sir A. Frazer's note of 6 Dec. 1904—Home Public Progs A, Feb. 1904, as cited by Sarkar, n. 1, pp. 17-18. In his earlier note of 7 Feb. 1904, Frazer had already pointed out "that Bengal is very densely populated, that Eastern Bengal is the most densely populated portion, that it needs room for expansion and that it can only expand towards the East. So far from hindering national development we are really giving it greater scope and enabling Bengal to absorb Assam" (emphasis ours). *Ibid.*
Indeed, the seeds, thus sown, developed into the vexatious Bengali-Assamese conflict in due course.
3. Tripathi, n. 1, pp. 96-103, 158-9 and 175.

At Silchar on 21 August, Pal asked the people to learn politics and "tactics of war" from the resurgent Japan. He was reported to have said:

"The time had come now for the Hindus to prepare themselves. They had opened Swadeshi Schools, and held Swadeshi meetings not only for the purpose of teaching books, but also to teach the art of war, as the day had come when the *Feringhi Raj* would not reign much longer in India.... Indian money is taken away by *Feringhis*, while the people starve for want of money.... They could not govern India or stay in it if the Indians did not co-operate with them".

Silchar was caught in the whirlwind of the boycott movement in the wake of two more speeches of Pal on 22 and 23 August. Wholesale traders, who happened to be Hindus, warned their retailers that the latter would not be supplied with tobacco and pulses, in case they sold foreign salt. Carters of the town boycotted those merchants who—all Muslims—had stocked Liverpool salt. Even washermen in their caste meeting decided not to wash foreign cloth. Pal revisited the town in March next year, after addressing a meeting at Habiganj in February. The second Surma Valley Political Conference was held at Karimganj in April 1908 and the third, at the village of Jalsuka, in 1909. Incidentally, Pal—the harbinger of revolutionary nationalism—was imprisoned for six months in Bengal in 1907-8 and soon, after his release, he left for England on a political mission. During the years of his sojourn there (1909-11), he climbed down to a moderate stand and, on return, lost his magic influence on the people.⁴ A divided Congress movement during the years 1907-15 and the blind alley of terrorism based on militant nationalism and the Hindu religious appeal—in effect strengthened the Muslim communal reaction. By 1909 Sylhet had branches of two Bengal terrorist parties—the *Suhrid Samiti* and the *Anushilan Samiti*. The *Swadesh Sevak Samiti* (estd. 1906) was probably an offshoot of the latter body.⁵

H. Mukherjee and U. Mukherjee, *Bipin Chandra Pal and India's Struggle for Swaraj* (Calcutta, 1958), pp. 45-48, 71 and 110-12. Quotes from his speech are as they appear in the *Confidential History Sheet*, cited *ibid*.

For reference to the second as well as the third Surma Valley (Sylhet-Cachar) Political Conference, *The Bengalee*, 19 April 1909 and R. N. Aditya, *Fight for Freedom in Sylhet* (Karimganj, 1964), pp. 2-3.

Home (Pol.) Progs. Deposit, August 1909, No. 26—Appendix II, (NAI) and Narendrakumar Gupta Chaudhury, ed., *Shrihatta Pratibha* (Sylhet, 1961), pp. 233-4.

There was no ground for the Assamese to be happy or to gloat over their becoming once more an appendage of Bengal—this time of Eastern Bengal. The new province was reportedly going to be called 'North Eastern Province'. Padmanath Gohain-Barua (1871-1946), in course of his editorial comment in *Assam Banti*, 10 July 1905, raised an alarm at the prospect of the very name of Assam being obliterated for ever. He diffidently accepted the proposed new province as a settled fact, but at the same time made a plea for at least retaining the word 'Assam' in its designation. As the anti-partition swadeshi movement gathered momentum in Bengal, his stand was further articulated. He urged upon the Assamese people, in course of another editorial, to stand up in protest against the merger itself. He appealed to the Assam Association and the Jorhat *Sarvajanik Sabha* to take up the issue.⁶

Neither the new-born Assam Association nor the Jorhat *Sarvajanik Sabha* led by Assamese planters did respond to the call. For as early as February 1904, both Manik Chandra Barooah and Jagannath Barooah, their respective spokesmen, had extended conditional support to the Curzon Plan. Fuller's skillful, divisive role was the decisive factor in this matter. He believed—mistakenly if not mischievously—that the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley "speak a language which is, in fact, a dialect of Bengali".⁷ But like many other British civilians of his day, he too thought that the growing tree of Indian nationalism could be cut at its roots only by isolating the Bengali babus. The prevailing situation of the Bengali hold over Government jobs in Assam as well as the pitiable public status of the Assamese language provided a handle. Not much enthusiasm was observed among the Assamese people in

6. P. Goswami, *Manikcandra Barua aru teonr yug* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1970), pp. 79-80.

7. Quote from Bampfylde Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences* (London, 1930), p. 104.

M. C. Barooah, in his note of 27 Feb. 1904, Enclosure 7, Govt. of Assam to GI, 6 April 1904, Home Public A, Feb. 1905, No. 156 (NAI) was prepared to accept the new province provided 80 per cent of vacancies in government jobs were preserved for local candidates. On behalf of the Jorhat *Sarvajanik Sabha*, Jagannath Barooah, too, expressed essentially a similar view in course of his note dated 10 Feb. 1904.

Sir Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner from 1896 to 1902, had noted earlier: "Every educated Assamese is bound to know Bengali just as every educated Welshmen is bound to know English...All efforts to boost up Assamese as a separate language are, I am convinced, doomed to failure". —File No. Home A, Dec. 1897, No. 50-54, cited by M. Kar, "Assam's language question in retrospect", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Sept. 1975), pp. 21-34.

favour of swadeshi. "So far as Assam is concerned", wrote *Amrita-bazar Patrika* on 29 December 1905, "the swadeshi movement does not seem to have touched even the outer fringe of Manchester trade".

When he was the Chief Commissioner, Fuller projected himself as a champion of the Assamese cause. The Government Resolution of 17 November 1903 provided that, save with the Chief Commissioner's previous sanction, all appointments were to be henceforth limited to *bona fide* permanent residents of Assam alone. Of course, newcomers who had acquired land or house property, and could prove their intention to live in Assam permanently, were also to be counted as permanent residents. He ordered that so long as candidates possessed the required educational qualifications, preference was to be given to the Assamese.⁸

It was partially through Fuller's efforts that the struggling Assamese language, then in a decadent and moribund condition, was recognised by the Calcutta University in 1903 for purposes of its entrance examination. Incidentally, there was only one Assamese newspaper in 1906 as compared to ten in Hindi, nine in Oriya and eight in Bengali.⁹ As the first Lieutenant Governor of the new province, Fuller found in the Assamese, as well as the Muslim religious community, a counterpoise to the 'expansionism' of the Bengali Hindus. Seemingly based on a sense of justice, this manoeuvre was sure to bear bitter fruits in the context of the 'divide and rule' policy. Although Fuller's resignation was accepted on 3 August 1906, his policy in this respect was continued by his successors.

The Councils Act of 1892 and Assam

It was in 1906 that Assam came to enjoy belatedly the right of representation in a provincial council formed under the Act of 1892. For, now it was an integral part of a Lieutenant Governor's province endowed with a legislative council. This Council was a small body of 15 members only, out of which two quasi-elective seats were allotted to Assam. These members did not come through elections in the ordinary sense of the term, but were merely recommended in rotation by groups of public bodies, such as the local boards and municipalities. Thereafter it rested with the Lieutenant Governor

8. Fuller, n. 7, p. 109; Govt. of Assam Resolution of 17 November 1903, cited in S. M. Lahiri's speech of 31 August, *ALCP* (1938), pp. 32-33.

9. Sarkar, n. 1, p. 377.

to accept the recommendations of those bodies or not, as he thought fit. Even the Lieutenant Governor in those days had no power to appoint the members of his Council. He could only make a nomination which was subject to the sanction of the Governor-General.¹⁰ So small a Council could hardly accommodate the top brass of all communities. Particularly so, since two-thirds of its members were in practice always Europeans. It was no surprise therefore that the Assamese community went unrepresented on this Council until February 1909.

Saddled as it was with an official majority, the Council hardly enjoyed powers worth mentioning. Estimates of expenditures prepared for the provinces used to be submitted to the Government of India. These were minutely checked and often altered by its finance department and then incorporated in the consolidated Indian budget. This budget was then discussed in the Imperial Legislative Council; and extracts relating to the provinces, in the respective provincial Councils. However, the latter were not allowed to pass resolutions affecting the budget or, for that matter, anything else. Formal questions could be put if due notice was given, but no supplementary questions were allowed. The rules laid down that a member desiring to make any observation on any subject before the Council was to address the President without rising from his chair. "The old Council was in fact a sort of advisory committee and" said a Governor of Assam in 1923, "had no pretensions to parliamentary status of any kind".¹¹

Such a Council could not naturally attract much public attention in the stormy days of the swadeshi. Even then, the desire for wider political participation was genuinely there in the minds of the Indian members. Rai Bahadur Sitanath Ray, a zamindar member from East Bengal, timidly pointed out in 1907 that since the budget, being fixed a long time ahead, was unalterable and since the non-official minority could not move an amendment on any budgetary item, "such discussions and debates can have hardly more than an academic interest...". He demanded that all the

10. Governor's address, 16 August, *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 694-7. At the time of Curzon's visit to Assam in 1903, the public there even demanded a seat in the Imperial Legislative Council, which was not conceded.—*The Bengalee*, 8 Sept. 1905.
The Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council held its first meeting on 18 December 1906.
11. Governor's address, 16 August, *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 694-7. Also see Tripathi, n. 1, pp. 207-8.

Councils be reformed and enlarged and "a potential and substantive voice allowed to the people in the legislation and in the management of the finances of their own country". He repeated the same view again next year.¹²

The proceedings of the new-born Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council during the years 1906-12 amply show how the upper-class leaders of the two linguistic areas entered into petty squabbles and, thus, played into the hands of the rulers. A Bengali zamindar member in 1907, for example, gave vent to the fear that Eastern Bengal would be starved 'for the benefit of a poorer and much less civilised country'. Making a false claim that Anandorum Barua, Bolinarayan Bora and a host of other distinguished gentlemen had taken pride in calling themselves Bengalis, he said:

"But times are changed and the cries 'Behar for Biharis' and 'Assam for Assamese' have commenced to bar the passage of the Bengalis into the services of those countries...".

Sitanath Ray, who acclaimed himself as a loyalist 'to the backbone', also echoed the same fear in April 1908.¹³ We do not know what would have been the immediate reaction of an Assamese member to such statements, for none sat in the Council until in February 1909 when Manik Chandra Barooah came in as a representative of the local boards of Assam. As a spokesman for Assamese middle class interests, he had already emerged as an important public figure.

The Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division, Lt. Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, publicly warned against the danger of the Assamese language being crushed and the Ahom and Assamese Hindus being elbowed out of all employment by the people from Eastern Bengal. Taking the cue from him, Barooah in his maiden speech in the Council said that "the partition in its present shape was a mistake", and that Assam had suffered most under the Curzon Plan. He implored the Government to protect the special interests of the Assamese as a minority community. He pointed out that while only 10 per cent

12. Speech by S. Ray, *EBALCP* (1907), No. 4, p. 85 (page numbers refer to relevant Gazette issues).

In course of a letter, Surendra Nath Banerjee advised K. K. Chanda in 1906 not to stand as an election candidate and also to persuade D. Deb to follow the same course as a mark of protest against the partition. Banerjee to Chanda, 17 May 1906. (Transcript in the possession of the Chanda family). Apparently, Chanda obliged.

13. Quotes from speech by Maharaja Girijanath Ray, *EBALCP*, (1907), No. 4, pp. 93-94. Speech by S. Ray on 6 April, *EBALCP* (1908), No. 3, p. 61.

of the province's total revenue should have come from Assam on the basis of its relative population strength, it was actually contributing one-third. Thus, contrary to the common belief, it was being taxed more heavily than Eastern Bengal. The same point had also been made two years earlier by Rai Bahadur Dulalchandra Deb (1841-1921) of Sylhet, but his estimate of Assam's contribution to the total revenue then was at one-fourth. In continuation of his speech, Barooah showered praise on Fuller for having "officially recorded in unambiguous words the exclusive rights of the children of the soil to the public services of their country". With reference to the European planters, he said:

"The planting community have been the pioneers of progress and enlightenment in Assam. Their example has stimulated a number of my countrymen to follow an independent and honourable profession, and I am glad and thankful to say that at the present moment, though their number is small, there are some Assamese tea planters, who are doing a lucrative business and occupying a much coveted position, and that with the brighter prospects of the Industry, the number is sure to increase".

Incidentally, Barooah did not miss his very first opportunity in the Council to declare on behalf of the Assamese people their 'loyal devotion to the British crown', as was the usual ritual in those days.¹⁴

Assam and Morley-Minto Reforms

Under the Indian Councils Act of 25 May 1909, embodying the Morley-Minto Reforms, the provincial Councils were enlarged and given a non-official majority. But, in practice, there was a European majority, all nominated Indian members forming its trail. The draft budget for each province provided for all obligatory expenditures and also showed a sum of varying amount as "unallotted expenditure". After a scrutiny by the Government of India, this was discussed by a small committee of the provincial Council, called the Finance Committee, of which half the members were elected. Having before it all the particulars of the sanctioned schemes, this committee only recommended appropriate financial provisions from the funds earmarked as "unallotted expenditure". Its views were considered before the consolidated draft financial statement

14. Speech by M. C. Barooah on 6 April, *EBALCP* (1909), No. 3, pp. 57-62. Speech by D. Deb on the budget, *EBALCP* (1907), No. 4, p. 90.

for the whole country was finally introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council. Changes made through resolutions affecting taxation proposals for grants to the provinces, if any at that level, were communicated to the provincial Councils.

After all these adjustments were over, the provincial Council was allowed to move resolutions on the budget—it was of course presented in a cut and dried form—and on other matters. These recommendatory resolutions were generally of little effect in regard to the budget under discussion. They had only an indirect effect on the next budget. Moreover, the budget itself was only an estimate from which the Government could depart any time without further reference to the Council. Supplementary questions were, for the first time, allowed under this Act; but they could be put only by the member who had asked the original question.¹⁵

No nation-building activities could ever be undertaken at the Council's initiative under such a rigid financial system. Hence, the reforms were rightly spurned by the Congress movement of the day. No such dissatisfaction was, however, reflected in the Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council itself. In course of his speech in the Council on 6 April 1909, Manik Chandra Barooah went so far as to hail the reforms scheme. For, according to him, "the people considered the reform scheme to be their Magna Carta of rights and privileges". Perhaps, the sole cause behind his wonderful perception was the fact that, in response to an address presented at Gauhati on behalf of the Assam Association, Sir Charles Bayley had held out the hope that the Assamese would soon receive their representation on a sure footing in the reformed legislature.¹⁶ In a way, perhaps, Barooah's analogy was quite pertinent, since the Magna Carta, too, came as a small concession to the upper classes, and its meaning was expanded in due course only under the pressure of popular struggles.

Regulations framed for East Bengal and Assam under the Indian Councils Act of 1909 came into force on 15 November 1909. They provided for a maximum number of 42 Council members and a non-official majority. The representation of Assam on this body increased, as a result of the reforms, from 2 to 5. Local boards of the two Valleys elected one each. The municipalities of Assam elected one

15. Tripathi, n. 1, p. 208.

Governor's inaugural address in 1921, *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, p. 25. Governor's address, 16 August, *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 696-7.

16. Barooah's speech on 6 April 1909, n. 14, p. 58.

member. One member of the Mohammedan Constituency was alternately elected by the Surma and Assam Valleys, with the former getting the chance first. Besides, one additional member representing the Surma Valley was likely to be elected alternatively either from the landholders' or from another municipal constituency. For the province's tea interests, there was a provision for two seats. The enlarged provincial Council that emerged had forty members, and its first meeting was held on 4 January 1910. An examination of its membership list, as of 14 March 1910, shows that out of the 39 members present on that day, excluding the Lieutenant Governor who presided, as many as 21 were Europeans, 16 Bengalis and only 2—Manik Chandra Barooah and Rai Bahadur Bhuvanram Das (d. 1917), Assamese.¹⁷ The latter two were elected from the Brahmaputra Valley.

It is very clear from the Council proceedings that, due to a lack of rapport between Eastern Bengal and Assam, the handful of members from the latter region had practically no role to play. They had to look forward to the administration for support, rather than to the body of non-official Indian members, whenever they wanted to bring into focus such subjects as the opium question or the unfair community-wise distribution of Government jobs. Limited job opportunities provided the apple of discord between the Assamese and Bengali middle classes.

More about the Swadeshi Movement

The swadeshi and boycott movement of Bengal and Sylhet did send its ripples to the Brahmaputra Valley. On 12 November 1905, a big meeting was held at Bagribari under the patronage of the local zamindar, S. N. Sinha Chaudhuri, the proprietor of Bengal Soap Factory, to protest against the partition. The extremist challenge in the form of terrorism, too, found a few adherents in lower Assam. At Gauhati, a Bengali employee of the Assam Valley Trading Company, Govinda Lahiri, and Ambikagiri Raychaudhury (1885-1967) tried to organise the local students in the spirit of swadeshi. A group of Assamese students decided to work for two days a week at the steamer and railway stations and donate their earnings towards the

17. *East Bengal and Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1909-10, p. 11. Mazumdar, n. 1, p. 422. Membership list of the enlarged Council on 14 March 1910, *Eastern Bengal and Assam Gazette*, Part VI, 20 April 1910. Raja Prabhatchandra Barua—a son of the soil more at home with Bengali than with Assamese—was the only nominated Indian member from the Brahmaputra Valley. But he was not present in the house.

COMPOSITION OF ASSAM LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL 1912-20

Chief Commissioner	(Ex-officio President)	1
Nominated Members	(including not more than nine officials)	13
Constituencies for Elected Members:	<i>No. of Electors :</i>	
Municipalities	119 Commissioners	2
Local Boards	217 L. B. Members	2
Landholders	192 Landholders	2
Muslims	1,188 Electors	2
Tea Planters		3
Total Strength of the Council		25

(One expert member might be added, if found necessary.)

The Assam Legislative Council, so formed, held its first sitting on 2 January 1913. Technically, it had a non-official majority, but certainly not a non-official Indian majority as such. The officials nominated on the body were invariably European by race with the exception of one or, at the most, two. All the three elected planter members were also Europeans. Even the non-official, nominated to represent labour, was in the initial years a European. One of the Indian members being elected to the Imperial Legislative Council, his seat in the early years continued to remain vacant. A close examination of the composition of the first Council shows that the European members, together with one or two Indian official members, had always an assured majority in the house. It was not ordinarily so in the second Council. But there, too, in a full house of twenty-five, there were thirteen Europeans, including the President as against twelve Indian members on 13 March 1918. Of the latter, one was a Parsi official, six were Bengalis and five Assamese. The rulers saw to it that the Assamese and Bengali members had a numerical parity in the house. The elective seats were evenly distributed between the two Valleys with a view to achieve this purpose. Besides, the nomination of Indian members, too, was skilfully manipulated, if necessary, to maintain the parity.²²

Thus counterpoised in the legislature, the Bengali and the Assamese middle class elements often tended to act as rival groups. In the absence of a common political platform outside the Council, their

22. East India (Constitutional Reforms) Lord Southborough's Committee, Vol. I. "*The Franchise Committee 1918-19*" (London, 1919), p. 76. Padmanath Gohain-Barua, *Mor Jivan Sonowaranii* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1971), pp. 199-204 and the list of members present on 13 March, *ALCP* (1918).

narrow group interests, cleverly posed as their respective community interests, dominated the proceedings. Yet on such common questions as further democratisation of the administration, non-official Indian members often forged a united stand, although they did not necessarily think in terms of a stable opposition bloc.

The Indian members considered the House to be a sort of debating society where certain issues of public importance could be focused. But even this opportunity was, under the procedural rules of the Council Manual, more limited in practice than what was originally intended by the Morley-Minto Reforms. The procedure required full five days' notice if a member wanted to raise a discussion on the budget. At least until 1917, not a single resolution was moved—and hence no specific discussion could follow—on the particular budget items. Not that the Council members lacked acumen to do that. It was because of official failure to present the draft financial statement to members in time that they failed to give the required notice for raising a discussion. Castigating the Government for its impracticable procedure, Saiyid Muhammad Saadulla (1886-1955) said:

“We consoled ourselves with the thought that we could not be authors of the budget, yet we had the valuable right of discussing the budget and try to persuade Government by moving resolutions to modify it according to popular view...by an impracticable procedure and on the strength of a rule in the Council Manual, this cherished right of real discussion of the budget is being snatched away, and the right of the people to influence the main heads of the budget turned into a sham”.

But all his arguments fell on deaf ears. Members were advised to present themselves at Shillong a week or so before the session so that they could collect the relevant papers in advance and notify the Government about their proposed motions on the budget. Thus, the procedural handicap continued to be there till the end of the Council's life.²³

The British declaration of 1917, promising further constitutional reforms, and the country-wide restlessness about the political future brought a firm shift in the attitude of the Council members to this debating society towards the close of World War I.

23. Speech by S. M. Saadulla on budget, 25 April 1917 and Botham's reply thereto, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2 pp. 124-5.

Radha Binod Das (1857-1938), a lawyer of Sylhet, gave vent to the general feeling when he said in the Council on 6 April 1918, in an exasperated mood:

“Sir, we have met today in this Council with the avowed object of talking, and of doing little besides. I fail to appreciate the usefulness of such talk, and I sincerely hope that the reform scheme will sound the death-knell of such solemn talk. We shall then be spared the necessity of participating in the discussion of the Budget without having the power to control it, and of offering suggestions which there is no obligation to carry out”.²⁴

Thus, what was termed as the Magna Carta by M. C. Barooah in 1909 to begin with, was increasingly put under ridicule since about 1917.

Elections to the Council were held in 1912 and again in 1916. Thereafter its life was extended twice by an executive order in anticipation of the reforms. Public interest in it, if any at all, was ebbing out fast. So uninteresting and useless were the proceedings that Radha Binod Das and Tarun Ram Phookan (1877-1939), both busy lawyers, resigned from the body—and wisely—in early 1919 after a prolonged absence.²⁵ So did Phani Dhar Chaliha (1854-1923) in protest against a derogatory remark made from the chair. About this time, his son Kuladhar Chaliha (1888-1963), too, resigned from Government service.

Tame Performance of Indian Councillors

During the years 1912-20 altogether twenty Indian members, including two officials, had served on the Legislative Council for a part or whole of the period (see Appendix 8). Almost all the loyalist or moderate members came from the educated top social stratum, with considerable landed property, tea gardens or lucrative legal profession as their mainstay of political influence. At least thirteen of them were already, or in due course to be, Government titleholders. The social background of two important Councillors of the period may be discussed here to prove the point.

Manik Chandra Barooah, son of a Government servant, was undoubtedly the doyen of politicians of the Brahmaputra Valley

24. Speech by R. B. Das on 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 3, p. 130.

25. Chief Commissioner's comment from the chair on 5 April, *ALCP* (1919), No. 2, p. 90.

of his time. An honorary magistrate since 1884 and the general secretary of the Assam Association since its inception in 1903, Barooah was also the first non-official and Indian chairman (26 March 1913-24 July 1915) of the Gauhati Municipality. His meteoric rise and fall as a businessman was referred to in Chapter II. About his faith in "benign British rule" and about his expressed gratitude to the British planters, enough has already been said. With facts and figures at his finger tip, he utilised almost every Council session he attended to show that the educated Assamese were not getting a fair share of jobs in their own land. However, one should also note that during the last four years of his office he took a leading part in exposing the planters' grip over the local boards and in demanding their partial democratisation (to be discussed later). As early as 13 March 1915, he alleged that large-scale immigration of East Bengal Muslim peasants belonging to "a notoriously turbulent class of people" was going on for several years and asked the Government to "take precautions that they may not come into conflict with the local villagers". Barooah also pressed on the Government that time had come to amend the Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886, and make a rent law for Assam since the rights of tenants and sub-tenants of *lakheraj*, *nisfkheraj*, *devottar* and *brahmottar* lands had not yet been properly defined. "The 'dolois' or managers of the temples" he said "indiscriminately lease out temple lands for their own benefit".²⁶

It remains a puzzle why he was not made a Rai Bahadur. Perhaps, he was considered too big for the title and yet, as a mere provincial (or Valley) politician, not big enough for a Knighthood. Under the compulsion of unenviable local circumstances, he could not afford to aspire for an all-India stature he deserved and, in fact, attended only one session of the Indian National Congress (1890). He failed or refused to see that Assam's miseries followed from a system of colonialism. However, it was he "who for the first time showed to Assam", as said Saadulla in a condolence speech, "what bright prospects lay behind trade and commerce".²⁷ Indeed it was his chequered career again that showed how such prospects could also end in a disaster in the given colonial situation.

Ghana Shyam Barua (1867-1923), too, breathed in the same loyalist-moderate tradition. He and Abdul Majid, the lone Assamese

26. Speeches by Barooah on 13 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 2, p. 38 and *EBALCP* (1911), No. 3, p. 110, respectively.

27. Homage paid to late Barooah on 5 Nov., *ALCP* (1915), No. 4, pp. 141-3.

official nominated as a Councillor and later made a high court judge, matriculated in the same year, studied together for two years in the Presidency College of Calcutta and served together as joint-secretaries of the Assamese Students' Literary Club (Calcutta). Elected from the Local Boards' Constituency to the Assam Legislative Council, Barua represented it on the Imperial Legislative Council for the term 1913-16. Himself a planter, he pleaded for exemption of tea from income taxation on the ground that it was an agricultural rather than a manufactured produce. In this respect, he lent full support to the European planters' lobby in the Imperial Legislative Council.²⁸

Barua almost emerged as the unofficial opposition leader in the second Assam Council. He was general secretary of the Assam Association for three consecutive years until replaced by T. R. Phookan in its Goalpara session (December 1918). Incidentally, the latter relinquished his office prematurely, and the mantle fell on Nabin Chandra Bardaloi (1875-1936). Barua was not only a successful lawyer but also the promoter and owner of a small tea garden in his own district. As a counterpoise after 1917 to the tide of national movement, he was increasingly favoured by the colonial rulers. He was made a Rai Bahadur and appointed Vice-President of the Assam Legislative Council in September 1919. Indeed he was the first non-official Vice-President in the annals of Indian Legislative Councils. While a few of his erstwhile colleagues chose to be non-co-operators, he got himself elected into the Reformed Council. A minister under the Dyarchy, he died in harness on 26 March 1923, unsung and unwept.

On the question of the opium evil, the grazing tax and the sham local bodies, Barua's sharp exposures, inside and outside the Council, did show up the mettle of his leadership. But with the eclipse of moderate politics, his hold even on the middle classes rapidly relegated to obsolescence.

OPIUM POLICY AND GRAZING FEES UNDER ATTACK 1906-1920

The Fact-sheet on Opium

The thread of our discussion on the opium evil may be picked up

28. 5 Apr., *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 260-4 and G. S. Barua's speech on budget, *ILCP*, 1916-17, pp. 513-4.

from where it was left in Chapter II. We had observed that after a gradual fall in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the total opium consumption once more recorded a rising trend since 1897-98. The treasury price of opium, which was kept fixed at Rs. 37 per *seer* during the whole period from 1890-91 to 1908-9 was revised to Rs. 40 for the period 1909-13, and then gradually raised to Rs. 57 by 1920-21. The number of licensed opium shops was, at the same time, cut down from 728 in 1905-06 to 315 in 1920-21. By 1914, the ceiling on the quantity allowed for private possession, as well as on the retail sale of opium at a time, was reduced from three to two *tolas*, and of individual possession of smoking preparation from one to one-half *tola*.²⁹ These were but half-hearted, petty measures—obviously not equal to the task. The provincial consumption of opium went on increasing by leaps and bounds, alongside an increase in the excise revenue—the real purpose behind the policy. The opium consumption and the relevant Government revenue of the province increased from 1,415 maunds and 1,982 thousand rupees, respectively, in 1905-06 to 1615 maunds and 4412 thousand rupees by 1920-21 (see Appendix 4).

Statistics of annual opium consumption in so many *seers* per 10,000 people are also available and are reproduced below.

ANNUAL CONSUMPTION PER 10,000 PEOPLE (*Seers*)

	<i>Assam Province.</i>	<i>Brahmaputra Valley</i>	<i>Indigenous Assamese Population only</i>
1881	123.4	255.9	313.4
1891	95.5	188.7	267.2
1901	84.3	177.7	274.9
1911	85.5	172.7	277.1
1921	81.1	151.9	286.9

Source : Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (Jorhat, 1925), p. 97. Though not strictly accurate in calculation, these estimates are acceptable as fair approximations.

Thus while the official policy was claimed to be 'maximum of revenue with minimum of consumption', its real aim turned out in

29. *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (Jorhat, 1925), Appendix X, pp. 90-91 and 138-9. Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and Ganja Consumption (Botham Committee, submitted on 18 April 1913 and said to be published on 5 Dec. 1913), pp. 1-23.*

practice to be both an increase in revenue as well as consumption, so far as the vitally affected segment of the society was concerned. As against the internationally accepted norm of six *seers* per 10,000 people,³⁰ which could be safely allowed to the concerned population, the relevant consumption was as high as 267 *seers* in 1891 for the indigenous Assamese population; and it gradually increased to 287 *seers* by 1921. This was the net outcome of the colonial taxation policy in operation, and that, too, in the name of containment of opium !

For the Assamese people, this situation involved a life and death question. Yet the anti-opium agitation took time to gather momentum. The dependent educated middle class, with their vested interests in tea plantations and in the bureaucratic-distributive system, appears to have been unfit for the task. For even the most outspoken critics of the policy would not, until the days of the Non-Cooperation, raise such demands as direct taxation of the planters' incomes as an alternative revenue source to relieve the over-taxed peasantry. On the contrary, some of those middle class leaders like Jagannath Barooah, Devicharan Barua and their Jorhat *Sarvajanik Sabha*, lent support to the official opium excise policy towards the close of the last century (See Appendix 9). In that context alone, the anti-opium agitation of the subsequent years was significant.

Opium Issue inside and outside the Council

In 1907 an Anti-Opium Conference was held at Dibrugarh, with official blessings and at the initiative of local social workers. Apart from submitting a memorial to the Government urging upon it to check the opium menace, it also gave out a call for the formation of an Assam Temperance Association, with permanent committees functioning at the subdivisional level, in all towns of the Brahmaputra Valley. The organisational plan was, however, not carried out. There was again in 1912 an Anti-Opium Conference at Dibrugarh, with the Satradhikar of Dinjay Satra (the abbot of Dinjay monastery) in the chair, where a temperance society was formed. It recommended the opening of a public register of opium-eaters, as had been successfully done in Burma, with a view to check further progress of the habit.³¹

30. C. F. Andrews, *The Opium Evil in India* (London, 1926), p. 22.

31. ACOER, n. 29, p. 142. Dilip Chaudhuri, *Nilmani Phukanar Cintadhara* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1972), p. 16. Gohain-Barua's speech on 10 April 1913, *ALCP* (1913), No. 5, p. 72.

Simultaneously, there was also the pressure of international public opinion. In the wake of the Sanghai International Opium Commission (1910), the Government of India went into the question of the prohibition of opium-smoking—the most injurious form of taking the drug—but considered the task to be impracticable. Under the Hague Convention of 1912, India was formally committed to suppressing opium-smoking in all its provinces. Accordingly, it advised the Assam administration to impose necessary restrictions on opium-smoking. Inside the provincial Council too, Assamese members were increasingly expressing their anxiety over the opium situation. Government members invariably tried to explain away the rising trend in opium consumption in terms of a rapid population growth, as well as of an increasing purchasing power under the resurgent conditions of prosperity. They argued that a more severe restrictive policy would have driven the addicts to other intoxicants. Nevertheless, under pressure from all quarters, the Government of Assam appointed a committee on 10 December 1912 to go into the question and report. The committee was formed with A. W. Botham as the chairman, and Kaliprasad Chaliha, (1862-1914), Kutubuddin Ahmed (d. 1948) and Radhanath Phukan (1875-1964) as members.³²

In his maiden speech in the Council on 10 April 1913, Padmanath Gohain-Barua thanked the Chief Commissioner for appointing the committee. He said that the steps hitherto taken with a view to reduce opium consumption, namely, the enhancement of its price and a reduction in the number of its vendors, had failed to produce the desired effect. He was strongly in favour of the Dibrugarh proposal for the opening of an opium-eaters' register.³³

The Botham Committee's Report submitted on 18 April 1913 was no doubt revealing, but its recommendations were disappointing. It concluded that a severe restriction on opium, without similar restrictions on *ganja* (hashish), would only divert consumption from one drug to the other. It refused to recommend a system of personal registration of opium-eaters. Instead of a total ban on opium-smoking that accounted for about half the consumption, it merely prescribed "prohibition of smoking in company" as a deterrent.

32. Speech by P. G. Melitus, a Govt. member, on 5 April, *EBALCP* (1910), No. 3, p. 95; Major Kennedy's speech on 10 April, *ALCP* (1913), No. 5, p. 106. Revised Financial Statement for 1914-15, 13 March, *ALCP* (1914), No. 11 (*Sic*;) pp. 34-5.

33. Gohain-Barua's speech, n. 31.

Government did not implement even this mild recommendation. It only increased the retail price to 12 annas per *tola* and accepted some minor suggestions with effect from 1 April 1914.³⁴ The opium statistics of the subsequent years as cited above amply show that, even as an eye-wash, these measures were a total failure. The report was withheld from the public for years until it was made available in 1925 under Congress pressure.

The wordy battle over opium in the second Council reached its climax in the last two years of its existence. On 5 April 1919, in course of his speech on the budget, Phani Dhar Chaliha, a retired Government servant and a Rai Bahadur of whom a mention has already been made, warned: "If the opium trade is retained, the Assamese race will be almost extinct within about two hundred years hence". Pointing out to increasing smuggling, he emphasized that nothing short of a total ban on the opium trade would really and materially benefit the people. Angry at his remark that the opium revenue was 'tainted money', Chief Commissioner Beatson Bell tauntingly remarked from his Presidential chair that every bit, out of that tainted revenue, earned by Chaliha as a Government servant and pensioner, should then be returned.³⁵ Chaliha thereafter resigned.

Swan-song of the Debating Society

The annual conference of the Assam Association at Barpeta in December 1919 recommended gradual eradication of opium trade within a period of ten years. The matter was forcefully brought before the house on 13 March 1920 by Ghana Shyam Barua in the form of a resolution. He moved that, in order to eradicate the opium habit or bring it down to an unavoidable minimum, the Government should introduce a system of personal registration of opium-eaters, at least in the Brahmaputra Valley, and that a careful count of opium-eaters should be taken at the next population census. He said that, at the time of the Botham Committee, the average annual consumption of opium was 141 grains per head in the province as a whole, but as high as 357 grains per head in the Brahmaputra Valley as against 91 grains in Berar and 14 to 47 grains in other

34. *ACOER*, n. 29, pp. 136-9. Chief Commissioner's Resolution of 22 April 1914 on Botham Committee's Report, No. 2444 M. in Municipal Dept., Govt. of Assam.

35. P. D. Chaliha's speech on the budget on 5 April and Chief Commissioner Bell's comment from the chair, *ALCP* (1919), No. 2, pp. 64-6 and 90.

Indian provinces. Barua submitted that the per capita consumption in the Brahmaputra Valley had since increased to 554 grains. And this was so when the bare medicinal need of opium in any country was estimated by the League of Nations to be about seven grains per head of population per year. According to official circles, the number of adult opium-eaters 'probably' amounted to a lac in Assam.³⁶

The discussion on the resolution was resumed on 8 April. To enhance its chances of acceptance, Barua remodelled it on his own to restrict its scope to Assam proper alone, where the evil was mostly concentrated. But of the twelve Indian members present in a full House of twenty four, only four—Saadulla, Krishnakumar Barua (d. 1951), Chandradhar Barua (1874-1961) and Ghana Shyam Barua—voted for the resolution. The fifth and lone European vote in favour was Playfair's. All the three Hindu and three Muslim members from the Surma Valley, Rajendranarayan Chaudhuri—a Goalpara zamindar, and four Europeans voted against. The rest remained neutral. After this performance, the dying legislature had one more session in October 1920.³⁷ But by that time every body must have forgotten its existence in the excitement of a new kind of politics outside the Council that had meanwhile gripped the country.

Discontent over Grazing Fees

In land-abundant Assam, peasants enjoyed from times immemorial the traditional right to graze their cattle freely on the village commons and neighbouring forests. Hence, never before were they in the habit of growing fodder crops on their own private lands. Under the British regime, this right was gradually encroached upon to bring forth additional revenue to the exchequer. A grazing fee per head of horned animals was introduced. In 1888 this fee was 8 annas per *annum* per head of buffaloes and 4 annas per head of cows.³⁸

As early as 1 July 1903, the ryots of about thirty *mauzas* of Gola-ghat subdivision sent a memorial to the Chief Commissioner protesting against the grazing fee on buffaloes, but the Government upheld it. The fee was raised to Re. 1 per buffalo in 1907 and still higher again in 1912. The Grazing Rules, which were framed in 1911, were somewhat modified after an official enquiry in 1915, under the

36. Dalim Bora's interpellation on 23 Feb. *ALCP* (1921), Vol. I, p. 9. Also G.S. Barua's speech, *ALCP* (1920), p. 41.

37. 8 April, *ALCP* (1920), No. 2, pp. 92-100.

38. Reid's reply, 23 Sept, *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, pp. 708-10.

pressure of public opinion. Thereafter this grazing fee continued to be Rs. 3 per buffalo and annas 6 per cow. In the Hills districts, a rate ranging from Rs. 4 to Rs. 6 was in force since 1917. Incidentally, milch buffaloes in the vicinity of towns were taxed at the concessional rate of rupee one per head until 1916 and rupees two thereafter. Though initially an insignificant source of Government revenue, these grazing fees were indeed an expanding source because of a steady rise in the immigration of Nepali and other graziers along with their cattle. The total number of buffaloes taxed in the Brahmaputra Valley increased from year to year as follows:

Year:	1895	1900	1905	1910	1915	1920
No. :	15,640	18,735	24,346	40,000	42,000	86,325

As a result of the increase in the number of buffaloes as well as in the rates of fees payable and the tightening up of the collection machinery, the revenue from this source doubled between 1916-17 and 1920-21, as can be seen from the relevant figures given below:

Year :	1916-17	1917-18	1919-20	1920-21
Rs. 1000 :	183	342	277	341

People resented not only the increased fees but also the arbitrary and harassing methods of their collection against which there was no relief in civil courts of law under the rules. The burden was practically limited to the Brahmaputra Valley which abounded in grazing grounds. For example, as against the total collection of Rs. 2,77,356 as grazing fees from this Valley in 1919-20, only Rs. 25,841 were collected from the Surma Valley and the Hills districts. The assesses were divided into two classes—(i) professional graziers and (ii) agriculturists. While the latter were allowed exemption under the revised rules up to ten heads of cattle, the former had to pay for the whole herd.³⁹ It was over the definition of a professional grazer and anomalies in assessment that disputes arose between the agriculturists and the Government.

The revamping of the grazing fees and tightening of the collection machinery during the years 1912-17 raised a storm of protest in the Brahmaputra Valley. An analysis of the relevant statistics clearly shows that the bulk of the agriculturists were not touched by this

39. Ibid, pp. 708-12.

Dalim Bora's speech, *ibid*, pp. 703-8.

Reply to Saadulla, 13 March, *ALCP* (1917), No. 1, p. 26.

Speeches by G. S. Barua and Botham, 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4, pp. 186-93.

tax. In 1917-18 only 622 cattle-owners of local domicile were treated as professional graziers. The total revenue of Rs. 277 thousand collected in 1919-20 from grazing fees was accounted for by only one and a quarter lac of cattle actually assessed in that year under the rules. The overwhelming bulk of these cattle again belonged to 6,319 professional graziers of whom, excepting a few hundred, all were Nepali migrants.⁴⁰

A question arises as to why the resentment was then so widespread and persistent. Obviously, the rich peasants and the town-dwelling absentee landholders used to invest in a small way in herds of cattle left under professional graziers' care. They were powerful enough to launch an agitation through the revitalisation of the Assam Association since around 1914. One argument put forward by them was that the tax would raise the price of milk products to the detriment of the people—particularly in urban areas. Although by and large it represented sectional interests, the agitation had mass support because of the traditional background explained earlier.

The Assam Association took the lead of this persistent agitation during the years 1914-20. Anxiety over the assessment of cattle-owning Assamese peasants and landholders and their harassment was raised in the Council, again and again. No subject had come so frequently before the House in the form of questions and resolutions, said an official member in 1921, as the grazing tax issue. Opinions expressed in the Council were but a reflection of the public opinion outside. The public of Dibrugarh submitted a protest memorial on 20 July 1914. The Assam Association expressed its concern over the issue in its meeting at Gauhati on 9 October 1914, and in its annual sessions at Gauhati in 1916 and Sibsagar in 1917. In the latter session, a resolution was passed for the first time firmly demanding a total abolition of the grazing tax.⁴¹

The demand for its abolition was raised by Phani Dhar Chaliha

40. Webster's reply to Barua, 12 Jan., *ALCP* (1918) No. 1, pp. 7-8. Govt's statement in reply to Mahadev Sharma in Sept. 1927 cited in *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 84-89 (App. A).
41. Reid's reply, 22 Sept., *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, p. 708. Gohain-Barua's questions, 10 Nov., *ALCP* (1914), No. 4. Questions by Barooah, 13 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 1, p. 38 and Botham's reply thereto. T. R. Phookan's speech, 6 April, *ALCP* (1916), No. 2, p. 39. Questions by Saadulla and Chaliha 13 March, *ALCP* (1917), No. 1, pp. 13 and 26. It was Chaliha who referred to the Assam Association's stand. Govt's reply to Saadulla, 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4, p. 175. *The Mussalman*, 4 Jan. 1918.

in the Council on 6 April 1918. On 5 October the same year, G. S. Barua formally moved that the tax on the so-called professional graziers in the Brahmaputra Valley be entirely abolished or at least reduced to the level that had prevailed before 1912. He described the measure as "oppressive, hateful and abominable". In the face of official opposition, Barua pleaded in a conceding mood that at least the *bona fide* native and domiciled cultivators should have the free allowance of ten cattle "now supposed to be made to him, whether he makes a profit from cattle-breeding or not". Chaliha and Saadulla lent support to him in the animated debate. However, the fate of the motion was pre-destined; it was lost as usual, for lack of official support.⁴²

Barua, the unofficial leader of the Opposition, later compromised his stand. But the agitation was sustained, and it led to many animated debates subsequently in the Reformed Council.⁴³

STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATISATION OF LOCAL BODIES

On the Municipal Front

It was noted in Chapter II that municipalities of Assam, except the one at Sylhet, always had without exception ex-officio European chairmen right up to 1912. With the election of Parasuram Khaund—an honorary magistrate—as the first non-official chairman of the Dibrugarh Municipality on 11 April 1912, a beginning was made in Assam towards Indianisation of this office. However, Khaund was forced to resign from chairmanship within a month or so under European pressure. It was not until 15 February 1915 that this Municipality had once more a non-official and Indian chairman in the person of Radhanath Changkakati. The Silchar Municipality had a non-official Indian chairman since 1913. The Gauhati Municipality—which had refused so long to avail itself of the permission granted as far back as 1888 to elect a non-official as chairman—now followed suit. It elected Manik Chandra Barooah as the chairman on 24 March 1913. Barooah was succeeded—he died on 7 September 1915—by Bhubanram Das, an ex-member of the Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council.

42. 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4, pp. 186-90 and 193.

43. Speech by G. S. Barua, 23 Sept., *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, pp. 719-22.

Manmohan Lahiri, a Bengali lawyer and small capitalist, was elected chairman of the Tezpur Municipality on 4 December 1916.⁴⁴

In 1916, Government proposed to convert the Sibsagar Station Committee into a municipality, with an appointed chairman to begin with. The citizens there welcomed the municipalisation of the Station Committee, but did not like its chairman to be appointed. The demand of the Sibsagar Rate-payers' Association for an elected chairman was also voiced on the Council floor. Government had to concede this demand. The demand for elected chairmen for all municipalities was raised again and again in the Council by such members as K. K. Chanda, Muhammad Bukht Mazumdar (1861-1936) and others.⁴⁵

When the Assam Municipal Bill, 1917, came up before the House, Ramani Mohan Das and the Karimganj Bar Association wanted its postponement until the much-awaited British declaration on India's constitutional reforms. This was the general opinion in both the Valleys, despite the fact that the bill provided for an elective chairmanship. The Chief Commissioner therefore called an informal conference of all non-official Council members and asked for their opinion, since such a step would delay the proposed change. Out of the ten present in the conference, four favoured a postponement *sine die*; three wanted postponement till March and three opposed any such postponement. The Chief Commissioner decided to take up the bill in March.⁴⁶

Indian members offered stiff opposition when the bill was referred to a Select Committee on 13 March 1918. "By this time we all know" said Radha Binod Das "that the Bill has not been approved and accepted by the general public as a liberal measure". T. R. Phookan found that there was "a great deal of extra-official control provided for in matters of vital importance, which is quite opposed to the accepted principles of self-government". Das's amendment to postpone the consideration of the bill *sine die* was accepted by the House by eight votes to six, the officials remaining neutral.⁴⁷

Thus the Government was already yielding to public pressure

44. V. Venkata Rao, *A Hundred years of Local Self-Government in Assam* (2nd edn. Gauhati, 1965), pp. 144-6 and 149-50.

45. Ibid, pp. 146-7; Chaliha's question, 23 Oct., *ALCP* (1916), No. 4. Bakht Mazumdar's speech, 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 2, pp. 155-6. Citations by Rao, n. 44, p. 158n.

46. Chief Commissioner's speech from the chair, 12 Jan., *ALCP* (1918), No. 1, pp. 17-8.

47. 13 March, *ALCP* (1918), No. 2, p. 90.

on the question of municipal reforms. By 1918-19, thirteen out of twenty three municipal boards had elected non-official chairman.⁴⁸

Local Boards Under Planters' Clutches

Planters' domination over fifteen out of the nineteen local boards continued to persist. This domination was quite out of proportion to both their numerical strength as a community and their contribution towards the local rates. In 1912, for example, they paid Rs. 92,669 only as local rates whereas the rest of the rate-payers paid as much as Rs. 5,39,401. Nevertheless, there were 82 elected planter members on these boards, while only 57 represented the rural rate-payers. If the relative shares in the total contribution were to be the criterion for the allocation of seats, then the planters were undoubtedly favoured with a disproportionately large number of seats. They had 21 times their due share of local board seats in North Lakhimpur; 27 times in Mangaldai; 5 to 6 times in Jorhat, Golaghat, Sibsagar and Tezpur; about 3 times in Dibrugarh and Silchar; 25 times in Nowgong and 40 times in Gauhati. In each of these fifteen local boards excepting the Gauhati, the planter members outnumbered the so-called rural rate-payers' representatives.⁴⁹

European planters tried to justify this discriminatory and disproportionate distribution of local board seats by claiming to represent also the tea labour population. They pointed out that on the 765, 298 acres of plantation enclaves in the Brahmaputra Valley alone, there were, in 1914-15, 570,000 resident labourers whose interests were looked after by the planters. They also linked their claim to the £16 million British investment in the tea industry without which Assam would not have been developed at all.⁵⁰

Clearly the planters were not ready to contribute towards the local rates in proportion to the control they enjoyed over them. Such control was deemed necessary as they wanted their own local interests to be served first and best at public expense. For this purpose, they could go to any length. A typical example is the case of the Sibsagar Local Board. On 19 March 1913, M. C. Barooah complained that almost all its proceeds from local rates were being spent for metalling two particular roads and constructing a bridge—almost entirely to benefit the planters. So sure were the planters

48. Rao, n. 44, p. 152.

49. Ibid, p. 205. Speech by G.S. Barua, 12 Jan., *ALCP* (1918), No. 1, pp. 28-30.

50. Speeches by Playfair and Kennedy, 15 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 1, pp. 87 ff. Speech by Miller, 12 Jan., *ALCP* (1918), No. 1, p. 31.

of their grip over this local board that even its formal meetings, instead of being convened at its office premises, used to be held sometimes at the Assam Company's workshop town—Nazira, much to the disadvantage of Indian members.⁵¹

Indian Councillors like M. C. Barooah used the Council floor to expose the planters' stranglehold over the so-called 'rural self-government' and pressed for a change in favour of an elective system. They also demanded legislation for regularisation of the local boards which were, till then, functioning by virtue of an executive order. At long last, the Government introduced the much-awaited Local Self-Government Bill, 1914.

L. S. G. Act, 1915: Old Wine in A New Bottle

Democratisation of local self-government with a broad-based franchise was obviously not amongst the ostensible purposes of the Act. Nor was the political movement of the day committed to such a principle. The articulated demand was for elected representation of only the educated and propertied classes on all local bodies so that they could—within certain limits—influence the decision-making process at the local level. As a member of the Select Committee on the bill, M. C. Barooah agreed with the Government that the boards "need not be necessarily a representative body of all sections and interests". The Assam Association, of which he was the general secretary, was "decidedly of opinion that property qualification is the only qualification which should be recognised in forming the electorates".⁵² Even so, he found the relevant provisions of the bill unsatisfactory. "There ought to be a well understood principle of allotment of seats" he said *inter alia* in a note of dissent "according to the amount of payment of Local Rates...".⁵³

Another reactionary feature of this bill was the continued provision for appointed chairmen, except in a few special cases permitted by the Chief Commissioner. The *Eastern Chronicle* (Sylhet) voiced opinion for modification of this provision and deplored the fact of too much official interference.⁵⁴ Chanda moved an amendment to

51. Barooah's questions on 19 March and Govt's reply thereto, *ALCP* (1913), No. 4 and again on 13 March, *ALCP* (1914), No. 11 (sic!), pp. 22-23.

52. Articles on the bill in *Eastern Chronicle* (Sylhet), 5 Dec. 1914 and 19 Dec. 1914 cited in *L-S-G. A—June 1915*, Nos. 43-44, pp. 11-3. (AS). The quote is from a memorandum submitted by M. C. Barooah, gen. secy. of the Assam Association, to the secy. of the ALC, dated 1 March 1915, *ibid*.

53. Note of dissent by Barooah, cited in 13 March, *ALCP* (1914), No. 2, p. 161.

54. *Eastern Chronicle*, 5 Dec. and also 19 Dec. 1914, n. 52.

provide for an elected chairman invariably for all the boards and was supported by T. R. Phookan and Saadulla. However, it had to be withdrawn in the face of stiff European opposition.⁵⁵

From 1905-06 onwards the rural population had indirectly elected representation on all local boards, but in a perverse manner. Government-appointed village headmen called *gaonburhas* continued to elect the rural representatives, despite an increasing public protest.

Government's intention was to provide a system under which rate-payers would elect their own representatives to the village authorities, village authorities to the local boards, and local boards to the provincial Legislative Council. But as there were no such village authorities in existence in Assam Proper other than the *gaonburhas*, the provisions of the bill were self-defeating. The bill provided that "the village authority shall consist of a member or members appointed or elected in accordance with such rules as may be prescribed" in future. This clause was clearly permissive of the continuity of *gaonburhas* in Assam proper and of the *Chaukidari Panchayats* (formed under the Act of 1870) in Goalpara and the Surma Valley as the sole rural electors for an indefinite period. Chanda moved an amendment that such a village authority be plural and elected. This motion, too, had to be withdrawn to avoid a miserable defeat in terms of votes.

Amendments moved by Chanda and Gohain-Barua to make the representation of various sectional interests proportionate to their respective contributions towards land revenue and/or local rates, as far as practicable, were also defeated. So was the fate of other amendments except a few of minor significance. Some were withdrawn to avoid voting. Chanda, a lawyer of eminence, virtually emerged as the informal opposition leader during this debate. It had begun with spirit and earnestness, but sagged towards the end while being dragged on through the empty forms. Chanda pathetically said on 15 March 1915:

"...as our proceedings commenced and as the discussions which were placed before the Council by us were taken up one by one, the process of evaporation of our hope commenced and by the time the voting on clause 37 was taken, it reached almost a vanishing point".⁵⁶

55. 13 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 2, pp. 61-67.

56. K. K. Chanda's speech on 15 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 2, p. 84.

Yet he decided to go through the rest of the ritual and moved the amendments still standing in his name, one by one.

The bill was enacted almost in its original form, without any division at its final stage. Gohain-Barua did not miss the opportunity at the end of the debate to express his gratitude to the Chief Commissioner and President of the Council, "for having succeeded in giving a legal basis to our local boards—the first seminaries of political education for us in this country". All, however, did not agree with him in considering the L. S. G. Act as "a great boon conferred upon this poor province...".⁵⁷ The debate opened the eyes of several moderates who, in subsequent years, were to take increasingly a bolder stand.

Continued Struggle for Local Board Reforms

The Assam Association, in its annual session at Dibrugarh in December 1915, as well as at Gauhati in December 1916, passed resolutions expressing its concern over the continuation of *gaonburhas* as the rural electors for local boards. Government admitted the unsatisfactoriness of the situation and hoped to replace them soon by duly constituted village authorities. G. S. Barua, on 17 October 1917, again expressed his concern over the delay in the formation of village authorities. On 25 April 1917, both Chaliha and Barua reiterated that the distribution of local board seats between different sections should be related to their respective contributions towards direct taxes and that the non-official chairmen should be tried at least in some select local boards.⁵⁸

The last attempt in the Council to abridge the over-representation of the planters on local boards by a resolution was made by G.S. Barua on 12 January 1918. His speech on this occasion was one of the best in the Council's annals. He sharply pointed out that the planters were wanting in local knowledge and, except in the matter of communications, also in local interests. "The claim of tea-planters...is intrinsically based on their being agriculturists and payers of local rates and my point is that" said Barua "their representation should be proportionate to the local rates paid by them...". He was

57. Gohain-Barua's speech on 9 April, *ALCP* (1915), No. 3, p. 116.

58. Chaliha's question on 13 March, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2, pp. 13-16 and the replies thereto.
Reply to Gohain-Barua, 13 March, *ALCP* (1916), No. 2, pp. 2-5. G.S. Barua's questions, 17 Oct. *ALCP* (1917), No. 3. *ALCP* (1917), No. 2, pp. 118 and 120.

supported by Ramani Mohan Das of Karimganj, Saadulla and others. Bakht Mazumdar made the point that, beside the elected seats, the planters also had a share of the nominated seats. The Government spokesmen bluntly dismissed all these arguments on the plea that Assam owed its prosperity and development to the planter community. In a division forced upon the house, all the nine European members (excluding the President and the Vice-President) voted against and seven out of the eight Indian members, for the defeated resolution.⁵⁹

Chief Commissioner Archdale Earle proposed in early 1918 an experiment with a non-official chairman in one select local board in each Valley. In the Surma Valley, the proposal was carried through. But in the Brahmaputra Valley, it had to be finally dropped, because of alleged opposition from the concerned local board itself. By 1920, however, the Government permitted five local boards—North Sylhet, Sunamganj, Dhubri, Goalpara and Barpeta—to elect each a non-official chairman. The permission was extended to all by 1921.⁶⁰

The composition of local boards under the 1915 Act was not at all popular. The actual position of local boards in 1918 is exemplary. In that year, beside the ex-officio members, there were altogether 323 members in the nineteen local boards. Of them, 121 members were nominated, 82 elected by the planters, 82 elected by *gaonburhas* and 19 each elected by voters of the headquarters town and the mercantile constituencies. The ex-officio, nominated and planter members together accounted for no less than two-thirds of the consolidated membership of all the nineteen local boards. In fifteen of them, this concentration was still higher.⁶¹

In a sense, the local boards were 'political seminaries' indeed! Through their very way of functioning in Assam under close public watch in every subdivision, these boards laid bare the direct links of British monopoly capital with its colonial political system, and thus helped raising the popular anti-imperialist consciousness to a higher level.

59. 12 Jan., *ALCP* (1918), No. 1, pp. 26-34.

60. Edward's speech, 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 3, pp. 155-6. Rao, n. 44, pp. 161-2.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

In this context, a provision of the Act authorising local boards to levy a special tax on the landholders for construction of light railways by a two-thirds majority was particularly significant, since planters were interested in the construction of such light railways.

ASSAM'S GROWING ECONOMY AND POST-WAR UNREST

Economic Growth in the Province : 1905-20

After the short-term crisis in the tea industry was over by 1905, there was a steady and continuous growth in the province's economy almost till the end of World War I. By then one-fourth of the total acreage settled with planters had come under actual cultivation. The rate of growth of acreage under tea as—compared to the nineteenth century record—had of course slowed down under the restrictive, monopolistic policy of the Indian Tea Association. But, despite the introduction of fine plucking, both the quantity and the total value of output went on fast increasing as a result of the rising crop yield per acre and the rising price trend in the world market. The total output of manufactured tea in Assam increased from 134 million lbs. in 1901 to 200 million lbs. in 1913, and to 234 million lbs. by 1920. At the end of a decade of unbroken prosperity, the tea industry was found "well-equipped to stand the shock of the war". The summary of rupee company results published in the Indian Tea Association Report for 1915 showed an average dividend of 24 per cent in Assam. Fairly high dividends persisted through the remaining war years.⁶² About twelve lacs coolie recruits were brought into Assam—majority of them for Assam proper—between 1911 and 1931. Despite repatriation and other leakages warranting continuous replenishment of the labour force, a considerable number stayed back. (see Appendix 10).

Railway investments were even of greater importance during this period. Assam acquired 439 miles of new tracks during the decade 1901-11. There was also an expansion of ordinary peasant cultivation side by side. Ex-tea garden coolies were taking up wastelands for cultivation, mainly, in the neighbourhood of tea gardens. The extent of Government lands taken up by such coolies for cultivation increased from 112 thousand acres in 1906 to 262 thousand acres by 1921. This was in addition to their tenant cultivation on tea garden lands. Even coolies on the tea garden muster rolls carried on some cultivation of ordinary crops. For example, in 1920-21 they held 100,728 acres of tea garden lands as tenants, 10,376 acres as tenants

62. P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), pp. 170-1 and 144. E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (2nd edn, Calcutta/Simla, 1926), p. 356. A. Guha, "Socio-economic change in agrarian Assam" in M. K. Chaudhuri, ed., *Trends in Socio-Economic Change in India 1871-1961* (Simla, 1967), pp. 583 and 615-6.

of other landlords and 15,847 acres as direct settlement-holders under the Government, according to official sources. At the same time the immigrant, land-hungry peasants from East Bengal, of whom an estimated 85 per cent were Muslims, started settling down in their thousands since about 1905 on the uninhabited riverine tracts. According to the birth-place data of the 1911 Census, immigrants from adjacent Bengal districts numbered only 51,000 in Goalpara and 3,000 in Assam proper in that year. By 1921 altogether 141 thousand East Bengal immigrants had settled down in Goalpara and 117 thousand in Assam proper. The number of East Bengal settlers, together with their children in the Brahmaputra Valley, was estimated at 300 thousands by the Census authorities in 1921.⁶³

Marwari traders and even Assamese mahajans of Barpeta provided a substantial part of the necessary finance to enable the immigrant peasants to bring virgin soil under the plough. With their superior techniques of cultivation, these East Bengal peasants taught Assam how to grow jute, *mung* (a kind of pulse) and several other crops. For example, the acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased, as a result of this great population movement, from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-06 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-20.⁶⁴ A steady influx of Nepali graziers into the Brahmaputra Valley led to an increased cattle population and milk production. The number of Nepal-born persons in Assam increased from 21,000 in 1901 to 88,000 by 1931. All these factors were conducive to an overall economic growth. Between 1900-01 and 1920-21, the population of Assam proper increased by 41 per cent. The comparable gross cropped acreage under ordinary cultivation increased 54 per cent and the acreage under tea 29 per cent.⁶⁵

Besides, the belated impact of tea garden markets for farm products was found somewhat favourable to the local peasant economy. For, under the changed conditions, ex-tea garden and immigrant Bengali wage-labour were now available to an increasing extent in the neighbourhood of labour-short Assamese villages. This relative prosperity was not necessarily shared by all, and it was once more threatened by the post-war depression in the tea industry around

63. Ibid. pp. 582-4. Griffiths, n. 62, p. 304.

Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report 1921-22 (Govt. of Assam, Arbuthnott Committee) p. 23.

64. Guha, n. 62, Table 8 on pp. 600-1.

65. Ibid, p. 584 and Table 7a on p. 610.

1920. Economic and political struggles broke out in both the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys in the wake of the first world war.

Conditions of Peasantry

Nearly four thousand Manipuri tenants of a zamindar of Pargana Bhanugachh (Bhanubil) in Sylhet rose in revolt and killed two of his employees in 1900. The Manipuri peasantry of the district, numbering some 20,000, raised a fund to defend the accused in the court and got them released.⁶⁶ Nothing more is known about peasant struggles of the period under review here. Perhaps the peasant movement was not sufficiently widespread so as to attract the attention of the administrative reports and the press. At the time of resettlement in Assam proper in 1905, lessons of the 1892-93 Settlement were not forgotten by the administration. Hence the revised rates of assessment were, on the whole, relatively light and did not lead to any peasant unrest. The average rates, were reportedly decreased two per cent in Kamrup and increased six per cent in Sibsagar, although prices of farm products had considerably increased meanwhile.⁶⁷

In the absence of any specific tenancy legislation for the ryotwari areas, the landlord-tenant relations there were being regulated by contract, local custom and the principles of natural justice.⁶⁸ In the zamindari areas, the total lack of occupancy rights for the tenants was already becoming a cause for concern for the Government, as well as the enlightened middle class. During 1897-1917, a large number of memorials and petitions were presented to the Government of Assam by the zamindari tenants of Goalpara. These were occasionally supported by an agitation in the local press. On 15 November 1915, the Garo ryots of the Raja of Bijni in Goalpara sent a memorial to the Government against acts of zamindari oppression. Both M. C. Barooah and P. D. Chaliha suggested that the Bengal Rent Law of 1869, in force then in the district of Goalpara, be suitably amended to ameliorate the conditions of the zamindari tenants.⁶⁹ Sonaram Sangma, a Garo, emerged as a leader of the tenants' struggle against the Bijni Raj, which was at its peak

66. *Shrihatta Pratibha*, n. 4, p. 19.

67. R. K. Chaudhuri's speech on 19 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 873-4.

68. Reply to Chanda's Question, 7 March, *ILCP* (1917), cited on 25 April, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2.

69. Barooah's speech on the budget on 5 April 1911, *EBALCP* (1911), No. 3, p. 110. Chaliha's question on 13 March, *ALCP* (1916), No. 1. Editorial comment on the Bijni Raj, *Times of Assam* (Dibrugarh), 6 Nov. 1915 cited by Chaliha, *ibid.* Also A. J. Laine, D. C. of Goalpara on Special Duty, *An Account of the Land Revenue System of Goalpara : with Criticisms of the Existing Rent Law and Suggestions for Its Amendments* (Shillong, 15 March, 1917), pp. 14-35.

during 1907-1916. There was a simultaneous agitation in the zamindari estates of Gauripur, Mechpara and Parbatjoar as well. Tenants' agitation in Parbatjoar was led by Kalicharan Brahmo.⁷⁰

The official concern for the tenants' rights appeared to be conspicuously deeper than that of the Legislative Council itself, packed as it was with landholders. When the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1869, was being modified in Bengal itself in 1882, a similar amending bill was actually drafted in Assam. But as there was allegedly no articulated demand for it in the areas where sub-letting was rampant, the bill was dropped. As early as 1913, a bill on tenancy rights was again prepared for the district of Cachar, but it was dropped in the absence of any organised public opinion there in its favour. In 1916, the district magistrate of Goalpara was appointed on special duty to report on the defects of the 1869 Rent law, then in force in his district. His report, based on intensive local enquiries, was submitted in 1917 and accepted by the Government, but the contemplated legislation was postponed pending a regular resurvey and resettlement. It thus appears from later discussions in the Reformed Council that the pressing need for a suitable rent law was cold-stored. The Government did not like to antagonise the zamindars and landlords.⁷¹

Conditions of Plantation Workers

As a result of the recommendations of the Assam Labour Enquiry Report of 1906, certain changes were introduced in the legal position of the plantation workers. The planter's private power to arrest his workers was abolished in 1908. The labour districts of Surma Valley and lower Assam since 1908, and the remaining districts since 1915, ceased to be subjected to certain repugnant provisions of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901. A time-expired labourer, while still in Assam, could no longer be asked to sign yet another periodic contract under the Act of 1901. Under the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1915, further recruitment of tea labour through contractors and *arkattis* was made unlawful, and the tea garden Sardars were made the sole recruiting agents. In response to the new situation, the organised tea interests came forward and

70. Peasant agitation in Goalpara was directed both against zamindars and jotdars. Demands were raised for the issue of proper rent receipts, abolition of illegal cesses, grant of occupancy rights and protection against rent enhancements. Laine, n. 69, pp. 4 and 21-25.

71. Speech by Laine on 21 March, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 736-7.

formed the Tea Districts Labour Supply Association in 1917 to control and coordinate recruitment under the Sardari system. By 1920 it had complete monopoly over the supply of labour to the tea industry.

But this could not put a stop to the practice of enticing time-expired labourers to a fresh contract under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859. This, too, provided for imprisonment for a breach of contract. In fact this Act had already, to a large extent, replaced the Act of 1901 even before its repeal by the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1915. Penal labour contracts therefore continued to be there very much as before. It was not before 12 March 1920 that the 1859 Act was modified to eliminate the penal provision.⁷²

The official reports regarding workers' conditions on the plantations were revealing. An example is the report for the year 1917-18. The estimated number of children of school-going age on the plantations was two hundred thousand, but not even two per cent of them went to any kind of primary school. Wrote a European D.P.I. of Assam in his report for the year:

"Education steadily goes back in the tea gardens. The number of schools has fallen from 149 with an enrolment of 3,615 to 142 with an enrolment of 2,888 (these are only lower primary schools). The decline is in the number of 'C' class schools—i.e., schools maintained by the planters themselves."⁷³

Apparently, the average monthly wage earnings of Rs. 8.09 per man and Rs. 7.59 per woman, including diet rations, subsistence allowance and bonus in 1917-18 showed a slight improvement as compared to 1905-06.⁷⁴ But in real terms much of it was eroded by the rising prices.

In many tea gardens even the above rates were not available to the workers, as will be discussed later. Although the period from 1905-06 to the end of the war was, on the whole, one of prosperity for the planters, troubles did nevertheless take place in the gardens. Even during the war years, the semi-slave or semi-serf

72. Griffiths, n. 62, pp. 281-92.

ALECR, 1921-22, n. 63, p. 102.

73. D. P. I. of Assam, Report for 1917-18, p. 21, quoted by N. C. Bardaloi in "Condition of labour in the tea gardens of Assam", *India* (London), 14 Nov. 1919, p. 188.

74. Official figures cited by Bardaloi, *ibid*, p. 187.

status of plantation workers remained essentially as deplorable as in the days of Cotton and Fuller. Himself a petty planter, beside being a lawyer-politician, N. C. Bardaloi reported in 1919:

“A tea garden is like a small town by itself, with the barracks for labourers and the stately bungalows of the managers and their assistants. Nobody, not even the policemen can enter this kingdom without the manager’s permission. A manager may assault a labourer, insult him, and take girl after girl from the lines as his mistress, yet there will be none to dispute his action or authority. It is only at sometime when the manager’s cruelty surpasses all bounds that the labourers set upon him and assault him. Had it not been for the fear of Britishers and the guns and pistols they possess, and the fact that at their beck and call all the constabulary and magistracy of the district would come over there and punish the labourer, rioting would have occurred pretty frequently in these small dominions”.⁷⁵

Economic Struggle : Intensification Under War Strains

The period from 1905-06 to the end of World War I was one of high dividends, rising prices and relatively low wages. As the economic conditions of the labouring people tended to worsen, they were spontaneously drawn into partial struggles from time to time. According to official sources, out of 210 reported disputes between the planters and their workers during the period from 1904-05 to 1920-21, as many as 141 were cases of rioting and unlawful assembly.⁷⁶ These often ended in violence. In the year 1917-18, planters or their assistants were directly assaulted by labourers in as many as six disputes. Moreover, 172 contract-bound workers deserted their jobs. Warrants of arrest were issued against forty-seven plantation workers in that year, but of them only twenty-six could be arrested.⁷⁷

For a million-strong plantation labour population, these figures no doubt appear insignificant; but since relevant official reporting was deficient, these need not be taken at their face value. As the war was approaching its end, the discontent against rising prices culminated into an outburst of economic struggles and attacks on the established order in the plantations and elsewhere. It commenced with the queer phenomenon of a wave of *hat-looting*.

75. Ibid, p. 187.

76. *ALECR*, 1921-22, n. 63, p. 89.

77. Bardaloi, n. 73, p. 187.

In early 1918, the forbidding price of even the 'standard cloth' on sale caused wide-spread resentment and spurred a wave of looting of the rural *hats*. Having started in Bengal, the wave spread eastward, reached Sylhet and, finally, the western border of the Hailakandi subdivision of Cachar. S. P. Desai of the Indian Civil Service, then in charge of the subdivision, thought it to be the handiwork of anti-social elements and took stern measures, such as exemplary flogging of the culprits, to stop its further advance. Although he claimed success in dealing with the trouble, it was too complex a social phenomenon far beyond the understanding of a young civilian. For the same phenomenon also appeared in Assam proper with equal vehemence in reaction to high prices of salt, cloth and foodstuff. Several persons in this connection were sentenced to long-term imprisonment there.⁷⁸

A month-long strike at the Government Press in Shillong in August 1918 forced the *Assam Gazette* to cease its publication temporarily.⁷⁹ The next important strike was by the workers of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways in July 1920 on the demand for a 50 per cent wage increase. The 10 day-old strike was withdrawn only after a 30-35 per cent increase in all wages below Rupees 100 per month was agreed upon. This led to a wave of lightning strikes in the neighbouring plantation area. One-day strikes took place in three gardens of the British-owned Doomdooma Tea Company in Sibsagar, one after another, on 6, 15 and 25 September in protest against bad and inadequate rice supplies. On the last-mentioned day, three Marwari shops were also looted by the strikers. Workers in two tea gardens of the Pabhojan Tea Company, also British-owned, struck work on 21 and 22 September, respectively. They demanded an increase in their cash wages, from Rs. 6 to Rs. 8 per month, and also in the cheap grains supply, from 6 *seers* to 8 *seers* per week. The workers of Hookanguri garden of the British-owned Assam Frontier Company struck work on 27 September and raided a near-by *hat* for cloth and rice. In October there were swift and sudden strikes in three

78. S. P. Desai, "My Thirty-five years in Assam" in K. L. Panjabi, ed., *The Civil Servant in India* (Bombay, 1965), p. 62. Author's interview with Desai at Poona on 4 April 1973. Speech by R. B. Das, 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 3, p. 131; 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4; Chaliha's speech, 13 March, *ALCP* (1919), No. 1, pp. 35-6.

79. *Times of Assam*, 18 August 1918 and also 31 August 1918 cited on 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4, p. 162.

more British-owned tea gardens — Diamali, Monabari and Katonibari.⁸⁰

The basic cause behind these strikes of 1920 was the failure of wages to respond to the enormous war-time rise in prices and profits. The declared dividends of British-tea companies continued to be high, as can be seen from the examples given below :

DECLARED DIVIDENDS OF SELECT TEA COS : 1918-20

Name of the Company	Dividends Declared		
	1918	1919	1920
Pabhojan Tea Co.	35%	35%	25%
Doomdooma Tea Co.	15%	15%	10%
Assam Co.	25%	25%	15%
Jorehaut Tea Co.	30%	15%	15%

Declared dividends include also bonus to shareholders in the form of additional shares, if any.

Source : *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22, pp. 6-7. H. A. Antrobus, A History of the Assam Company, 1839-1953 (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 411 and A History of the Jorehaut Tea Co. Ltd. 1859-1946 (London, 1948) by the same author, p. 48.*

Working conditions were still inhuman and primitive not only in the small tea gardens but also in such big British-owned concerns as Monabari and Katonibari tea estates, which were under the managing agency of the Mcleod and Co. The monthly rates of wages there remained basically unchanged for about a quarter of a century till 1920. In course of the year ending September 1920, there was a decline in the average earnings to the tune of Rs. 2 in the case of men and Rs. 4 in the case of women. Monthly cash wages were Rs. 5 per man, Rs. 4 per woman and Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 per working child in the month of October. Even these wages were freezed by the planters in settlement of rice advances made by them. New coolies were enticed into 939-day agreements for a petty cash advance of Rs. 9 per head. Thus labour was reduced practically to the condition of servitude. It was but natural for the 2,857-strong labour force of Monabari to rise in revolt. Together with the workers of Katonibari, they struck work on 16 October, looted the tea garden shops and assaulted the supervisory Indian staff.⁸¹

80. Royal Commission on Labour of India, *Written Evidence, Vol. VI—Part 1 Assam and Dooars* (London, 1930), p. 25. *ALEGR*, 1921-22, n. 63, pp. 6-8.

81. *Ibid.*

The province-wide political upheaval that followed was an integral part of the national upsurge triggered by the call for Non-Cooperation. In the following and last section of this chapter therefore, it is proposed to recapitulate the national political background and to show how the people of Assam responded to the situation. Up to 1920, the Congress had no branch or formally affiliated body in the Brahmaputra Valley, nor was there any organised trade union in either Valley. The delegates from both the Valleys to the annual Congress sessions used to form a part of the Bengal delegation as was required by the then Congress Constitution.

TOWARDS A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS AGAINST IMPERIALISM

Political Situation : India and Assam

Indian middle classes showed a general desire to cooperate with the British cause in World War I rather than hamper it; and their aspirations were limited to what, in Pal's words, was "an equal co-partnership with Great Britain and her colonies in the present association called the British Empire".⁸² The Indian attitude was one of bargaining for political reforms as a price for loyalty to the British Crown. Muslims in general resented Great Britain's unhelpful attitude to Turkey which was constantly in trouble since 1911. And their younger sections, particularly those of the middle classes, were positively with the mainstream of Indian nationalism.

The economic unrest amongst the masses—the unrest in Assam has already been noted—spurred the all-India political leaders to forge a united stand for constitutional reforms. The Congress-League Pact of 1916, the reunion of Moderates and Extremists within the Congress the same year and the joint memorial submitted to the Viceroy in September 1916 by nineteen Imperial Legislative Councillors including M.A. Jinnah and K.K. Chanda—these created preconditions of a mounting pressure on the British Government for post-war political concessions. Referring to this growing Hindu-Muslim unity on the demand for self-government, Ramani Mohan Das in his speech of 25 April 1917 in the Assam Legislative Council said:

82. Quoted by Mukherjee, n. 4, p. 111. The quotation is from Pal's speech on the eve of his return from England in 1911.

"India of today, having rendered such valuable services both in men and money during this disastrous war in Europe, reasonably deserves a recognition of all these and that in the shape of raised status in the British Empire like her sister colonies..."⁸³

The spread of the Home Rule movement all over India, Gandhiji's appearance on the political scene in 1915 and his successful experiment of a peasant *satyagraha* in Champaran against European indigo-planters, the irrepressible vitality of the dedicated bands of terrorists in some provinces, President Wilson's general advocacy of the right of self-determination of the nations and, above all, the far-reaching impact of the Russian Revolution—all these combined in 1917 to highlight India's demand for self-government.

To meet this rising tempo, the Government of India adopted the double-edged policy of appeasement and repression. On the one hand, an increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration as well as "progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire" was declared on 20 August 1917, as the goal of the British policy.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the notorious Sedition Committee, presided over by Justice Rowlatt, was appointed on 10 December 1917 to enquire into the revolutionary movement and make recommendations to deal with it effectively.

Montford Reforms and Rowlatt Acts

In such a political situation alongside people's increasing concern over the rising prices, the middle-class leaders of the national movement vacillated between the acceptance of the anticipated reforms and their total rejection. Nevertheless the Joint Report on the Constitutional Reforms, published on 8 July 1918, was called "disappointing and unsatisfactory" by the Special Congress session at Bombay in August. Speaking on a resolution on the Reforms proposals in the Imperial Legislative Council on 6 September 1918, K. K. Chanda expressed his dissatisfaction with the Report and pleaded for the appointment of a committee to examine and modify the scheme. He stressed that nothing short of executive responsibility to the Legislative Council would satisfy the Indian public.⁸⁵

83. Speech by Das, 25 April, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2, p. 123.

84. Quoted by M. Jha, *Role of Central Legislature in the Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi, 1972), p. 38.

85. Speech by Chanda on 6 Sept. *ILCP*, April 1918-March 1919, pp. 113-5.

There was also a sharp reaction to the Rowlatt Committee's Report and the two bills introduced in the legislature on the basis of its recommendations. While opposing the Criminal Law (Emergency Powers) Bill in the Imperial Legislative Council, Chanda said on 6 February 1919:

"Now my Lord, you are going to give us reforms and side by side with them, and in fact, even before them, you are going to give us this repressive law. Will that pave the ground for the reforms in this country? If this measure is passed it is bound to create considerable agitation".⁸⁶

Almost all the 185 amendments moved by the Opposition fell through. The bill was passed into an Act, with all the 35 votes in its favour being cast by Europeans and all the 20 votes against it by Indians.⁸⁷

Gandhiji's initial favourable response to the Reforms was turned into a determined hostility to the Raj in the wake of the Rowlatt Report. After the passage of the Rowlatt bills, he started an all-India *satyagraha* agitation on 30 March 1919 in order to prepare the country for resistance to these lawless laws. A general *hartal* was called on 6 April, and this was to be followed by civil disobedience. Thus the 'considerable agitation' Chanda had warned against gathered momentum. The massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in its wake on 13 April 1919 raised the national anti-imperialist movement to a higher pitch. The Amritsar Congress of 1919, however, still debated over the tactics to be adopted vis-a-vis the Reforms, as Tilak was in favour of responsive cooperation. The Congress finally ended with a compromise resolution in favour of giving a fair trial to the reforms, as and when they were introduced.⁸⁸

The Government of India Act, passed by the British Parliament on 23 December 1919, however, fell short of the Indian aspirations. On the international plane the peace treaties of 1919 belied the war aims of the Allies and the 'fourteen points' of President Wilson. The dismemberment of Turkey roused hatred amongst the Muslim masses of India against British imperialism. In November 1919 Gandhiji

86. Speech by Chanda on 6 Feb. 1919, *ibid*, p. 81.

87. *Ibid*, p. 1192.

88. Jha, n. 84, p. 43.

was an active participant in the first Khilafat Conference. It was from this platform that he was soon to declare Non-Cooperation. Moderates thought it wise to split from the National Congress so that they could pursue a softer line, and they set up the National Liberal Federation of India in 1920. Within this frame of all-India political developments, Assam politics were undergoing a rapid change.

Assam Demands Major Province Status

Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, came to this country to ascertain the Indian opinion in November 1917. A delegation of the Assam Association pleaded before him in Calcutta on 6 December for the political advancement of Assam on a par with the major provinces. A similar delegation from the Surma Valley, representing both Hindus and Muslims and led by Abdul Karim (1863-1943), a member of the Bengal Legislative Council by virtue of his domicile there, also urged upon Montagu not only for constitutional advancement but also for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. In December 1917, the Sylhet Peoples' Association submitted a memorandum to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for the incorporation of their district into Bengal. The question was also brought up in the Imperial Legislative Council early in 1918 by Chanda in the form of a general resolution, recommending the constitution of linguistic provinces. It was however negated.⁸⁹

The re-emergence of the Sylhet question on the eve of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms was inevitable. At this time the theory of self-determination of distinct nationalities was gaining ground not only abroad, but also in India—particularly Assam. The Calcutta Congress session of 1917 was attended by a thirteen-member delegation from the Brahmaputra Valley—all representing the Assam Association, and nearly forty delegates from the Surma Valley. It was in this session that the Congress for the first time conceded the principle of linguistic provinces for purposes of its own organisation, in Andhra and Sind to begin with. The old demand for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal attained a new significance in this context. Chanda and others issued a public appeal in 1918 to renew the demand. The demand for a reconstituted Bengal on the basis of the linguistic

89. Bardaloi's speech, 17 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 802-3; Questions and Replies, 13 March, *ALCP* (1918), No. 2; Letter from Govt. of Assam, No. Pol.—1917-5587, dated 30 Oct. 1924 cited in Jan., *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, pp. 51-52; Chanda's speech, *ILCP*, April 1917 to March 1918, Vol. 56, pp. 492-5.

principle was voiced also in the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1918.⁹⁰

The public opinion in the Brahmaputra Valley, too, was no less in favour of the separation of Sylhet. But there were yet other aspects of this question. Would Assam, minus Sylhet, achieve major province status with a Governor heading it? The Government gave it to understand that it would not, in case Sylhet's demand had to be conceded. Besides, the separation of Sylhet would trigger off a similar agitation in Cachar and Goalpara for a merger with Bengal. In fact, Raja Prabhatchandra Barua, one of the founders of the Assam Association, and other zamindars of Goalpara, had by then already raised the demand.⁹¹ Thus, an uneasy feeling of uncertainty and inter-valley jealousy was cleverly brought into the situation by those at the helm of the affairs.

Fires Underground

The War Resolution that was passed by the Assam Legislative Council on 10 November 1914, pledging help to Britain, had unanimous support from all members—Indian as well as European. However, outside the Council a handful of terrorists in the Surma Valley continued to pursue their secret, anti-imperialist activities.

Some political suspects of Sylhet were arrested and put under internment or detention, but the grounds of such action by the Government were not disclosed in most cases. Mukunda Das, Bengal's great exponent of swadeshi people's theatre, was served in 1918 with a notice at Karimganj to leave Assam within twentyfour hours. Questions were asked on the floor of the Council about all such cases of curtailment of individual freedom⁹².

The continued repressive policy and the nervousness on the part of the rulers were but a recognition of the fact that the fire of militant nationalism was still smouldering. However, the Assamese middle class, at least its dominant section that had access to the Council,

90. Speech by B. N. Chaudhury, July, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 568-70 and speech by K. Deb, *ibid*, p. 588.

91. Speech by B. N. Chaudhury, *ibid*, pp. 575-6. Speech by Bipin Chandra Ghosh, 7 Jan., *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, pp. 105-6.

92. Anilchandra Datta, a school boy arrested at Calcutta in November 1916, Mohinimoban Ray-Burman of Habiganj, Bipinbehari De of North Sylhet and others like Hemchandra Sen of Habiganj and his brother were detained under orders of internment, outside their own home district. R. B. Das's interpellation, 13 March *ALCP* (1917), No. 1; R. M. Das's interpellation, 12 Jan. *ALCP* (1918), No. 1; interpellation by both, 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 3; R. M. Das's interpellation, 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4. p. 10.

had indeed no sympathy for the creed of revolutionary violence. In January 1918, some revolutionaries of Bengal were arrested at Gauhati in connection with the lone terrorist action in the Brahmaputra valley. T.R. Phookan sided with Government while taking part in the tribunal which sat to try the arrested persons. "The citizens and the public of Gauhati cooperated in the arrest", gloated R. K. Chaudhuri (1889-1955) years later in the Reformed Council "and captured all the revolutionary party."⁹³ Chaudhuri's comment was perfectly in tune with the general attitude of the Council, as reflected earlier also in the speeches of Ramani Mohan Das and Saadulla following the Maulvibazar bomb attack on a European officer on 27 March 1913.⁹⁴

Post-War Radicalisation : Towards Non-Cooperation

The talk of coming reforms, under the pressure of multi-form struggles of the people, roused political expectations in all quarters. In the Assam Legislative Council itself, Phani Dhar Chaliha said on 6 April 1918, "the proposed reform, when announced, will be found to be substantive and conceived in a liberal and generous spirit".⁹⁵ However, with the publication on 8 July of the Joint Report on the Indian Constitutional Reforms, all these expectations were belied. Even the prospect of Assam being brought within the scope of the Reforms Scheme with major province status appeared doubtful, in view of the opposition from the Chief Commissioner and the Surma Valley Branch of the ITA. At this critical juncture, the Assam Association took the bold step in November 1918 to send a hurried mission to London to plead for the case before the House of Lords' Selbourne Committee, then working out certain specific details of the principles laid down in the Report.⁹⁶

Almost the same age, on the wrong side of forty, and in the same lucrative legal profession, T.R. Phookan was certainly more colourful a personality than N.C. Bardaloi. The latter had never been on

93. Speech by R. K. Chaudhuri on the Assam Criminal Law Amendment Bill on 19 March, *ALCP* (1934), Vol. 14, pp. 683-4 and N. K. Guha, *Bangaiy Biplabvad* (In Bengali, 4th edn., Calcutta, 1976 B. S.), p. 259.

94. Speeches by Das and Saadulla on 10 April, *ALCP* (1913), No. 5, pp. 74 and 80.

95. Chaliha's, Speech, 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 3, pp. 133-6.

96. N. N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Gauhati, 1958), pp. 42-43. "Note by Sir N. D. Beatson Bell, dated 24 Oct. 1918" in *East India* (Constitutional Reforms)—*Letter from the Government of India dated 5th March 1919 and Enclosures on the Questions raised in the Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms* (Parliamentary Paper, London, 1919), p. 299.

the Council nor visited England till then. Phookan, on the other hand, was representing the landholders of his Valley on the Assam Legislative Council ever since 1912 and was an eminent England-returned barrister. Even his family background was more impressive. He was the grandson of Juggoram Khargharia Phukan (1805-38), a close associate of Raja Rammohan Ray and the first Assamese to learn English. Phookan's father-in-law, Parasuram Khaund, was also a man of influence. Nevertheless, it was Bardaloi, and not Phookan, who was chosen by the Assam Association to carry out its political mission in England. Prasannakumar Barua, Bardaloi's brother-in-law and a tea planter, accompanied him. The choice was no doubt significant. According to confidential police reports, Phookan—"an undistinguished and moderate member" of the Assam Legislative Council—was losing ground to a fellow politician.⁹⁷ Bardaloi too was well-connected. He was the son of a high-ranking Government servant, Rai Bahadur Madhavchandra Bardaloi, and was married to the daughter of a pioneer Assamese planter—Malbhog Barua. N. C. Bardaloi presided over the annual conference of the Assam Association at Dibrugarh in 1915.

Phookan attended the Calcutta Congress of 1906 but for many years thereafter was not much active in politics outside the Council. Presiding over the annual conference of the Assam Association at Goalpara in December 1918, he, however, struck a note of radicalism in his speech. He said :

"The Government is bad and bureaucratic.... The English officers and English traders and also a section of Indians do not advocate popular government, and Lord Sydenham and others say that India is not fit for self-government.... If India is not fit for self-government even after a century and a half of British rule, who is responsible for this? It is the British rule which is to blame".⁹⁸

The replacement of G.S. Barua by Phookan as the new general secretary and the election of Chandranath Sharma (1889-1922) as one of the assistant secretaries at this session, indicated the trend of radicalisation within the Assamese middle class. Phookan ceased to

97. Confidential, Home (Pol.) 1924—K. W., X to File No. 66, (NAI).

98. Quoted by Dutt, n. 96, pp. 38-39. The Goalpara session was attended by some 600 people, according to "Assam Police Abstract of intelligence 1917", in the Office of the Editor, "History of Freedom Movement", Govt. of Assam, Gauhati

attend the Council and resigned from its membership early in 1919. The fourth annual session of the Assam *Chhatra Sanmilan* at Tezpur the same year resolved to sponsor the use of swadeshi in place of foreign goods.⁹⁹ The same year also saw the publication of a new periodical, *Chetuna*, giving vent to the new mood.

Bardaloi presented the case for Assam before the Joint Committee on 25 August 1919 in a manner consistent with the Congress stand. This was noted by Congressmen like S. Satyamurti and Bipin Chandra Pal.¹⁰⁰ The Bardaloi mission to England was crowned with success and Assam eventually emerged as a full-fledged Governor's province under the Government of India Act of 23 December 1919. Sylhet, of course, remained with Assam as before. The Assam Legislative Council unanimously adopted G. S. Barua's motion on 13 March 1920 to tender 'dutiful homage', 'loyal devotion' and 'profound gratefulness' for the Gracious Royal Proclamation on the Reforms.¹⁰¹

People outside the Council—even N. C. Bardaloi himself—were not so happy with the offer of dyarchy, particularly over the issue of communal representation. There was a countrywide indignation against the Raj after the Punjab atrocities and the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh. On his return from abroad, Bardaloi got himself increasingly involved in the thick of politics and was elected general secretary of the Assam Association at its Barpeta session (1919). The careers of both Phookan and Bardaloi, eventful as they were since World War I, are illustrative of the vacillating, yet, on the whole, democratic role of the Assamese middle class during the inter-war period.

Bardaloi's father attained notoriety in the nineteenth century as a faithful Government servant for putting down the *Raij Mels* of 1983-94 with a strong hand and for giving evidence in support of the official opium policy before the Royal Commission on Opium in

99. Dutt. n. 96, pp. 40 and 47.

100. Bipin Chandra Pal's letter dated London, 23 October 1919, was published in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. In his letter of 28 October 1919 from London to *Asam Bilasini*, an Assamese student, Bidyananda Duara, also suggested that the separate representation made by the Assam Mission did in no way weaken the overall Congress stand, since it had little affinity with the approach of the moderates.

For details and the citations see O. K. Das, "Karmabir Bardaloi's so-wanranat" in C. Saikia, comp., *Smritigrantha: Nuvinchandra Bardaloi* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1975), pp. 87-89.

101. 13 March, *ALCP* (1920), No. 1, pp. 51-54.

(1893.)¹⁰² N. C. Bardaloi had to make ample amends in due course for all those indiscreet actions of his father. While practising in the Calcutta High Court during World War I, he got himself enrolled in the Bengal Light Horse with a view, in his own words, "to defend my home and die fighting for the glorious British Empire". He presided over the annual session of the Assam Association in 1915 and attended the Calcutta Congress of 1917 as a delegate. Since then he was active as a moderate politician. During his few month's sojourn in England, he addressed several labour meetings and published an article exposing the inhuman treatment of labour by British planters in Assam. This he did in order to rouse the British public opinion against the evil. Years later he narrated in a memorable speech in the Assam Legislative Council how he was transformed into an anti-imperialist agitator. He said :

"After I went to get Reforms, after I fought hard for the Reforms and after I had contributed something to get the Reforms for Assam, I returned to India only to see the blood-stained field of Jalliana Bagh and the callous indifference of our rulers. I travelled to that place—I walked on the field and while there I knelt down and said 'Oh, God! if this is what has come out of our being partners of the same Empire then save me from this Empire.' A man who was a faithful ally and a faithful and loyal subject of this British Government, on that day his heart was torn to pieces and his feelings were outraged. Then an agitation was set afoot throughout the country".¹⁰³

The process of disillusionment of Bardaloi, and for that matter of Phookan as well, was not exactly as sudden and dramatic in real life as depicted above. The local leadership of Assam came under the spell of Gandhiji's influence through a hard and fairly prolonged experience. The latter's stand on linguistic provinces particularly appears to have been a factor that attracted them.

The political struggle started with an organised attempt for Hindu-Muslim unity. Bardaloi, Phookan and others called a Khilafat meeting at Gauhati on 19 March 1920. After Tilak's death, the condolence meeting of the Gauhati public on 5 August 1920 passed a resolution urging the people to boycott the daily *Statesman*

102. Evidence of M. Bardaloi on 29 Dec. 1893, *Royal Commission on Opium*, 1893, Vol. 2, (London, 1894) pp. 302-5. R. K. Chaudhuri's speech on 19 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 873-4.

103. N. C. Bardaloi's speech on 3 April, *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 259-60.

chair on 26 October 1920, also unanimously passed a resolution recommending gradual implementation of the Non-Cooperation programme and a boycott of the Councils, after Tafazzal Hossain, a tea planter, and two others had walked out.¹¹¹

Meanwhile, a delegation representing the Assam Association and led by Bardaloi attended the Nagpur Congress. It was there that Bardaloi, like C. R. Das, changed his view and gave support to the Non-Cooperation Resolution. At Nagpur it was also decided to organise Congress henceforth on the basis of linguistic provinces. The Congress entrusted him, among others, to take some part in drafting its new constitution. A number of college students of Gauhati simultaneously attended the All-India Students' Conference, also held at Nagpur. Inspired by the new action-oriented mass politics of Gandhiji, they returned to Assam, ahead of Bardaloi, and put their college in ferment in January 1921. They found in Chandranath Sharma a new leader of a different type. This young Brahmin lawyer, hailing from a poor rural family of Tezpur, had no pretence of any upper class background whatsoever but for his caste. "Circumstances compelled me", said Bardaloi later with a hindsight "to call out boys from the college, only those who would work for the country and go to jail".¹¹² Thus started the Non-Cooperation movement in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Only a brief mention may be made here to the course of developments in the Surma Valley. K. K. Chanda presided over the politically tense Special Session of the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1919 in which a large delegation from the Surma Valley participated. The Khilafatists were already active in this Valley. An armed decoity committed in the house of a big money-lender at Patabuka in Sylhet on 20 October 1920 was suspected by the Government to have been committed by some fanatic Muslims connected with this movement.¹¹³

On 19-20 September 1920, the fifth Surma Valley Political Conference, with Abdul Karim in the chair, passed *inter alia* a long resolution moved by Khirodechandra Deb (1893-1937). It was clearly

111. "Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence 1920"—No. 759: Sibsagar, 30-10-20 in the *OEHFM*, Gauhati.
112. Bardaloi's statement, n. 29, pp. 54-57; "Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence 1921"—No. 34: Gauhati, 4 Jan. 1921 and No. 97: Assam S. B., 29 Jan. 1921 (transcripts in the *OEHFM*, Gauhati).
113. Patabuka decoity case cited 6 Feb., *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 48-49 and 83-84.

directed against the British planters and merchants, in view of their systematic opposition to national aspirations, their tyranny over the Indian employees and their complete identification with the Administration. As a first step towards complete, non-violent non-cooperation with British planters and merchants, the Conference recommended the following programme of action—

- (i) refusal to serve under European planters and merchants;
- (ii) gradual withdrawal of those who are already in such service;
- (iii) non-acceptance of briefs by lawyers from aforesaid non-official Europeans;
- (iv) refusal on the part of the people to grant or renew leases of land to them;
- (v) immediate withdrawal from any kind of association with them and abstention from all gatherings in which they are invited.

This resolution, as will be seen in the next chapter, apparently made a deep impression on the plantation labour of the Valley, but not before February 1921.¹¹⁴

With the province in political ferment, the general election held for the Reformed Council in November 1920 proved to be an anticlimax. All Hills areas, except the urban constituency in Shillong, had been excluded from the 1919 Reforms. The registered voters, numbering 203,191, constituted less than three per cent of the province's 7-million population in its enfranchised districts. All those who paid a land tax of Rs. 15 in Assam proper or a Chaukidari tax of Re. 1 in Goalpara and Surma Valley were entitled to vote. At first, nationalists were in a mind to go seriously into the polls. In a private letter to a friend, even a radical like Chandranath Sharma wrote on 7 May 1920:

“My honest and sincere opinion is that if I can't go to the Reformed Council much harm will be done to Assam, particularly its peasant community... Something has to be done by the Government regarding the Foreign Settlers. Otherwise, the country will have to face very bad days and a

114. Resolution quoted in full, 27 Sept., *ALCP* (1921) Vol. 1, pp. 881-4; *ALECR*, 1921-22, n. 63, p. 19.

community was roused to action in January 1921. In a public meeting at Gauhati on 2 January 1921, with Phookan in the chair, the student delegates returning from Nagpur and the young lawyer, Chandranath Sharma, implored students to come out of their schools and colleges to work for the country. Sharma himself suspended his practice with effect from 7 January to respond actively to Gandhiji's call. Lakshmidhar Sharma (1898-1934), then a post-graduate and law student at Calcutta, as well as other student leaders like Bidyadhar Sharma who had been to Nagpur, now played a significant role in drawing the students into the fold of Non-Cooperation. Under the circumstances, T. R. Phookan, N. C. Bardaloi and Kuladhar Chaliha—the three top leaders who had earlier opposed the student participation—reluctantly conceded that those who were determined to work for the country and go to jails could, of course, boycott their classes; but strikes *en masse* in schools and colleges should be avoided.² Students of the Cotton College decided in favour of the boycott call on 17 January and actually went on strike for an indefinite period with effect from 20 January 1921.³

Students came out on the streets all over Assam in large numbers, in their first flush of enthusiasm. After a month or so, however, most of them returned to their classes. Only 38 students of the two colleges of the Brahmaputra Valley were in fact found by the authorities absent deliberately from their classes on 16 February. Involvement of the school children continued, however, on a larger scale. It was reported in the press that half of the student population of Kamrup were still out of their classes towards the end of February. According to the education minister, the number of students who withdrew from colleges and the Government-controlled high schools was between nine and ten per cent of the enrolment at the height of the movement.⁴ The Director of Public Instruction later estimated that, of those who had joined the movement, some 15,000 never returned

2. Collated from: Bardaloi's statement, n. 1, pp. 54-57; M. Tayyebulla, *Karagarar Cithi* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1962), pp. 269-70; extract from 'Bidyadhar Sharma's diary' appended to B. Sharma, *Congressar Kanchiali Ra'dat* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1959), p. 295-7.

3. For details of the agitation among the Cotton College students, see "Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence 1921"—No. 34: Gauhati, 4 Jan. 1921, No. 56: Assam S. B., 15 Jan. 1921 and No. 97: Assam S. B., 29 Jan. 1921 (transcripts in the *OEHF*, Gauhati).

4. *The Mussalman*, 25 Feb. 1921; Minister's replies to R. N. Chaudhuri, 24 March *ALGP* (1921), Vol. 1, p. 77 and to Munawar Ali, 29 March, *ibid*, pp. 117-8; 'Bidyadhar Sharma's diary' n. 2, p. 295-7.

to their classes.⁵ Thus, undoubtedly there emerged a sizable core of dedicated student volunteers who soon moved out to spread Gandhiji's message of "swaraj in a year".

The principle of linguistic provinces for future Congress organisation had been firmly adopted at Nagpur in 1920 and N. C. Bardaloi was elected there as the first Assamese member of the AICC. But under the old Congress constitution, his seat on this body was still from the Bengal quota. The new Congress constitution provided for the formation of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee for the Assamese-speaking area i.e. the Brahmaputra Valley, with its headquarters at Gauhati. The Surma Valley was to remain, as before, under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Pradesh Congress. In January 1921, the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution allocating five AICC seats to the Assam Pradesh Congress to be set up.⁶

The Assam Association, which had changed its name and had already been virtually turned into a Congress platform at its Tezpur session,⁷ had a special and its last meeting at Jorhat, with Chhabilal Upadhyay in the chair in April 1921. Beside condemning the recent evictions of Nepali graziers from the Kaziranga Forest Reserves and police atrocities on them, the meeting also discussed the Non-Cooperation programme and organisational matters.⁸ This was followed by a representative provincial meeting of all Congress supporters at Gauhati on 5 June 1921 to elect the first office-bearers of the Pradesh Congress. Barring a few, none of the lawyer-leaders, not even Bardaloi and Phookan, had yet suspended their legal practice and, hence, could not yet be strictly termed as Non-Cooperators. As the consensus of the meeting was not in favour of electing a practising lawyer as president of the Pradesh Congress Committee, Phookan had to step down from the contest. He had already resigned in April

5. Speech by J. Cunningham, 10 Sept. *ALCP* (1930), Vol. 10, p. 743.

6. Anonymous, comp., *Indian National Congress 1920-23* (Allahabad 1924), p. 41; J. S. Sharma, *India's Struggle for Freedom: Select Documents and Sources* (Delhi, 1965), Vol. 3, p. 870; *Report of the Thirty fifth Session of the Indian National Congress, 26-31 December 1920* (Nagpur, n. d.), appendix B, p. 2.

7. The name of the Association was changed to "Assam National Assembly" and its declared object now was to work for the attainment of swaraj by all legitimate means and to adopt such measures as to effectively educate the people to that end—"Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence 1921"—No. 58: Darrang 8 Jan. 1921, (transcript in the *OEHFM*, Gauhati).

8. Krishnanath Sharma, *Krishna Sharma's Diary* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1972), p. 78. The political conference, as mentioned by Sharma, was indeed the special session of the Assam Association held at Jorhat in April 1921. Also see 'Bidyadhar Sharma's diary', n. 2, p. 296. A mention of the same meeting was made by O. K. Das in an interview at Gauhati on 10 July 1973, followed by correspondence.

export economy of Assam was caught into a deep crisis because of a slump in the tea industry and an unfavourable rate of exchange. There was a sharp fall in labour earnings and an increase in unemployment. Sporadic lightning strikes, not necessarily non-violent in character, were breaking out here and there against the planters' labour squeeze policy throughout the latter half of 1920 and the year 1921.

It was in September 1920 that the Surma Valley Political Conference had declared complete, non-violent non-cooperation with European merchants and planters as one of the goals of the movement and had advised people to withdraw gradually from service under them. What Congressmen meant by a gradual withdrawal from service was of course not 'strikes' as understood by labour. Nothing therefore came out of this resolution, although individual Congressmen here and there, tried to act in this spirit. For example, Abdul Matin Chaudhury (1895-1948), a young lawyer and Congressman (later turned a Muslim League leader), organised a Khansama Union at Shillong, reportedly with the motive of causing inconvenience to the resident Europeans. On 6 June 1921 he was ex-terminated from the district concerned, and thus ended the earliest attempt in Assam to form a trade union.¹⁴

In Sylhet and Cachar, however, the tea garden workers became once more restive since the beginning of 1921, because of persistent economic hardships. Their frequent contacts with the Congress-Khilafat volunteers at *hats* and bazars encouraged them to come out in action in their own way against the common enemy. In February three Hindi-speaking emissaries of the Non-Cooperation movement arrived at Srimangal and addressed meetings attended *inter alia* by groups of labour from the surrounding tea gardens. Similar meetings were held in Longai-Valley in March and April. According to official thinking, these meetings made a deep impression on labour which resulted in a prolonged strike in Lungla Tea Estate.¹⁵

During the first half of 1921, the sensational Khoreal Shooting Case laid bare the racist character of the planter Raj. The case was that a European planter who wanted to live with a coolie girl and,

14. Khaleque Chaudhuri's question, *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1., pp. 847-8. Son of a police sub-inspector, Chaudhury—an Aligarh graduate—had his law degree from Calcutta. He sat for the ICS examination, but was not accepted.—*Pol. B*, Nov. 1921, No. 262-269 (Chief Secy., Assam to GI, 23 August 1921). Chaudhury underwent a term of imprisonment as a Khilafatist.

15. *ALECR* 1921-22, pp. 9, 14 and 19.

on being refused, shot her father with a revolver was acquitted by the lower court. The Calcutta High Court set aside the proceedings and ordered a retrial. However, the accused was again acquitted by the jury on a verdict of eight to one. What was striking in this connection was that out of the nine jurors eight were Europeans. The wide publicity given to this case during the months, March-June, might have been an additional factor contributing to the growing labour unrest in the Surma Valley.¹⁶ In any case, there was a strike in Khoreal T. E. in or soon after April 1921.¹⁷

On 1 May 1921, the demand for an enhanced daily wage of eight annas for men and six annas for women was raised in a meeting held at Adampur in Dholai-Valley. On the same as well as the following day, Non-Cooperators held their meetings at Ratabari in Chargola-Valley. These meetings were reportedly attended also by the tea garden labour. The main theme of these meetings was no doubt Khilafat. Yet, according to police reports, one of the speakers from Silchar, Radhakrishna Pande, advocated not only the cause of swaraj but also a wage-increase in the plantations. He cited the examples of Khoreal and several other gardens around Lakhipur in Cachar where the labour had struck work for an increased pay. In Cachar strikes began in April 1921 and intermittantly persisted throughout the year.¹⁸

*Chargola Exodus*¹⁹

Strikes broke out at Dholai-Valley in south Sylhet in the first week of May. On 2 May, tea garden labour in Chargola-Valley struck work demanding a pay increase. Section 144 of the IPC was promulgated in the entire area within seven miles of the town of Sylhet and in several other sensitive areas, so that tea garden labour might not be contaminated by political agitation. Meanwhile, however, the historic labour exodus from Chargola and Longai-Valley in Karimganj subdivision had started with the return of 750 men, women and children from Anipur T. E. on 3 May. The simple folk had demanded a wage increase that was denied. They had lately heard of the name of Gandhiji and put their faith in myths concerning his powers of doing good to the oppressed. They, themselves, also indulged in all sorts of myth-making and accepted

16. *The Mussalman*, 5 March 1921 and also 1 July 1921.

17. *ALECR*, n. 15, p. 10.

18. *Ibid*, pp. 9 and 19.

19. *Ibid*. Also supplemented by other sources, as mentioned later.

Gandhiji as a messiah—an *avatar*. Their sufferings ultimately goaded them to follow the Gandhi path—to go back to their villages and live a simple and plain life.²⁰

Thousands of labourers, particularly from the tea gardens of Chargola and Longai-Valley, left their gardens and trekked to the nearest railway stations, many shouting “Gandhi Maharajki Jai” as they passed along the road. Determined to quit their jobs, they sold their cattle and other properties at ridiculously low prices. Considering the exodus to be a blow to the plantation economy, the Government tried to make the coolies return by persuasion and threats, but failed. Denied facilities of free travel on trains, turned destitutes in course of several days’ journey and falling prey to epidemics and police atrocities, the hapless workers assembled at Chandpur and other railway heads and began to subsist on relief. By 19 May their number had swollen to four thousands at Chandpur alone. On the night of 20 May they were fiercely chased out of the station yard by the armed police. They attracted sympathy of the Congress and the people at large. Sufferings of the stranded labourers continued to persist until, by the middle of June, all the coolies were on their way home. Adequate public funds were raised to meet their transport cost.²¹

In protest against the brutal armed police outrage of 20 May on the trekking workers, the railwaymen at Chandpur and Laksam junctions spontaneously struck work on 24 May. The local steamer workers also joined the strike after four days. The country was charged with indignation and the strikes paralysed the railways and the inland steamer navigation service—the two arteries of communications in Assam and East Bengal. According to police reports, Phookan was largely responsible for the spread of the May strike to the Brahmaputra Valley section of the Assam Bengal Railways.²² At a meeting of their Bar Association on 3 June the pleaders of Gauhati decided by a majority to suspend practice for three days in protest against the inhuman action of the authorities towards the coolies at Chandpur. A Gauhati public meeting, while echoing the same protest, also applauded the admirable solidarity action of the railwaymen.²³

20. N. K. Mitra, ed., *Indian Annual Register* (1922), pp. 1168-8, 193-5 and 203.

21. Ibid; J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Bombay, 1968), pp. 214-8.

22. Ibid; Confidential Home (Pol.), 1924, n. 1.

23. *The Mussalman*, 3 June 1921.

Following an ultimatum to the strikers on 7 June and an acute dislocation of food stuff supply, the strike had almost petered out at Lumding and other places when Phookan and Bardaloi intervened. They addressed the railway workers of Lumding on 19 June and successfully induced them to resume the strike. The same result was not, however, achieved with the Gauhati station staff. This historic Assam-Bengal railway strike lasted for about two and a half months, involving at its peak some 11,000 employees of whom some 4,500 lost their jobs altogether.²⁴ The steamer workers' strike that had lingered for six weeks was, however, settled a little earlier on a no-victimization basis.

The objective of the strike was the repatriation of the stranded coolies at planters' or Government's expense to their respective homes. It was a politically-oriented solidarity action, with the backing of the Non-Cooperators in general. Not all Congressmen, however were sympathetic to this form of struggle. Many of them contended, like Gandhiji himself, that labour strikes were outside the Congress programme.²⁵ Others—a section of the nationalist press—took up the issue of exodus and strikes for exposing the oppressive planters and the bureaucracy in league with them, rather than for a quick solution through a constructive welfare approach. It was this political aspect of the movement that evoked some bitter criticism from a social worker like C. F. Andrews.²⁶ But he, too, did not fail to condemn the outrages committed on the coolies in glaring terms.

The Chargola exodus, though a well-known historical episode, awaits further analysis as a social phenomenon. Generated by deep-rooted economic malady, the unrest in Chargola and Longai-

24. *IAR* (1922), n. 20, p. 205; "History-sheet of Tarun Ram Phookan" n. 1; *India in 1921-22: A Report Perpared for presentation to Parliament* (G.I., Home Deptt., Calcutta 1922), p.204. At the initiative of the local Congress leaders one hundred bags of rice were sent from Gauhati as relief to the Lumding strikers through a Marwari trader.

25. *The Mussalman*, 24 June 1921.

26. For a distorted view, see Broomfield, n. 21, pp. 216-9. Broomfield holds *bhadralok* Congressmen responsible, at least equally with the Govt. of Bengal, for deliberately lingering the avoidable transport strike and thus enhancing the sufferings of the trekkers. He passes judgements on men and their motivations, rather than on the resultant event as such, that emerged as an integral part of the mounting anti-imperialist struggle. His pointer to the exaggerated reports in the Bengal nationalist press on the 'Gurkha outrage' at Chandpur is hardly relevant. He should have noted that the railwaymen of Chandpur who struck work did not have to depend on the press to know what happened locally. Broomfield accepts his facts blindly from Bengal Government sources. He even distorts the views of Andrews. On this point, see also L. A. Gordon, *Bengal: the Nationalist Movement 1876-1970* (Delhi, 1974), p. 343n.

Valley groups of tea gardens first took the form of a strike for an increase in wages. Later it developed into a spontaneous mass exodus of workers in a pathetic endeavour to reach their village homes, hundreds of miles away. Relevant statistics are available for thirteen out of the nineteen tea gardens in Chargola-Valley and for half-a-dozen tea gardens in Longai-Valley. Out of a total labour population of 20,250 in these plantations, 8,799 or 43 per cent left their gardens. In the case of Chargola-Valley alone, this proportion was as high as 52 per cent (8,112 out of 15,618). Contract-bound Agreement labour, in most cases entitled to repatriation at employer's cost, constituted about two-thirds of the labour force concerned. They, as well as the free wage-labour were—more or less—equally involved in the exodus.²⁷

Why was it that the exodus on such a mass scale occurred only in the subdivision of Karimganj, particularly in Chargola-Valley, and not elsewhere? Relevant official statistics throw some light in this respect. It appears that a considerable proportion of plantation labour there were Hindi-speaking non-tribals (mainly Chamar by caste) who came from the Uttar Pradesh districts. In fact, more than four thousand people, i.e., half of those who left Chargola-Valley, returned home to the two U. P. districts of Basti and Gorakhpur in June. Their rehabilitation was no problem since the wage rates there were found more attractive than in Chargola-Valley. Recruited as they were from a relatively more politically advanced area and social segment, the Chargola labour were naturally very sensitive to the challenging political and economic situation. The other important factor relevant to their behaviour pattern was that forty-two per cent of those who joined the exodus had been in tea gardens for less than four years. They were probably not yet fully broken in for industrial discipline. These were some of the plausible official explanations of the exodus.²⁸

However, it was too complex a phenomenon to be understood in such simplistic terms. The majority of the workers—both tribals and non-tribals—were bound down to their ill-paid jobs by agreements under the Act of 1859 and other Acts. They were heavily indebted to the planters through a system of advances. An economic

27. Statistics contained in Govt. statement, 27 Sept., *ALCP* (1921) Vol. 1, pp. 885 and 894.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 889-93; extract from "Report on the revenue administration of the United Provinces for the year ending 30th September 1921" cited in *ALECR*, n. 15, pp. 12 and 15.

struggle at the beginning, the sporadic strikes culminated into a mass political action in the form of a collective escape from the bonded labour system. The exodus was an open revolt, a primitive rebel action against the legitimized conditions of serfdom. It was the product of an interaction between the Gandhian impact on primitive minds and the incipient class militancy.

Strike wave in the Brahmaputra Valley

Plantation labour had slightly higher earnings in the Brahmaputra Valley than in the other Valley. Nevertheless, labour there was no less in a discontented and angry mood. There were strikes in April and May in the Dibrugarh and Panitola groups of tea gardens and, on 22 June, at Suntak T. E., purely due to economic reasons. A large body of labourers of the last-mentioned garden, led by recruits from Ranchi district, looted several Marwari shops and manhandled the garden Sardars. The European managerial and other supervisory staff fled from the scene to save their skin. On charges of rioting, some sixty workers were jailed. The other tea estate in Sibsagar where a labour strike turned violent was Suffrey. Otherwise, most of the numerous strikes taking place in Sibsagar since April 1921 were peaceful in character. The coolies demanded higher wages and struck work, but generally returned to work after two or three days. A considerable number of workers in upper Assam left the tea gardens for their homes in Madras. They set out to walk in small batches and, by rail and steamer, eventually reached their destinations.²⁹

Darrang was the other seriously affected district beside Sibsagar. On 21 March 1921, there was a strike at Halem T. E. The supervisory staff was beaten up by the strikers. Then followed many garden strikes, one after another. In September and early October 1921, several peaceful strikes flared up in the Thakurbari group of tea gardens. The main demand raised was for a minimum daily wage of eight annas for men and six annas for women. These strikes were short-lived. But as they spread to the north, they took a serious turn. The strikers of Sonajuli T. E. on 9 October and of Kachari-gaon T. E. on 10 October manhandled their European bosses. Labour raised general complaints about low wages, excessive workload, inadequate facilities of leave, high prices of food and cloth

29. Barthakur, n. 9, pp. 83-84 and 96; ALECR, n. 15, pp. 15-20; H. A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 209.

and also about the withholding of wage payments to those suspected of helping absconders. The most serious outbreak was at Dhendai T. E. where the intervening Superintendent of Police was manhandled. In all these cases, the police and the bureaucracy helped planters to suppress the agitation through large-scale arrests and terrorisation of militant labourers.³⁰ Unfortunately, no sympathetic first-hand accounts of these heroic struggles are available today.

Congressmen, Planters and Coolies

The Non-Cooperation movement could not avoid an offensive directed against European planter domination in Assam. For the Raj in Assam essentially meant the planter Raj. No such well-defined line of action as the one embodied in the fourth resolution of the Surma Valley Political Conference (September 1920) was there in the Brahmaputra Valley. Nonetheless, there too, European planters' domination over the rural marts became the target of direct political action.³¹

In most of the tea gardens, there were weekly bazars and *hats*, where the villagers used to bring their farm products for sale to labour. These market-places were under the planters' exclusive control, often to the detriment of villager's interests. The other popular grievance was over the right of way through the sprawling tea gardens. In course of decades, the planters had usurped portions of many village paths and ancient public roads by bringing them within their enclosures. For example, such ancient roads as the Rajghar Ali in North Lakhimpur, Lahdoi Garh and Kharikatia Road in Sibsagar and the Raja Ali (Na-Halia Road) were encroached upon by the

30. *AIJECR*, n. 15, pp. 9-10 and 15-20.

About a thousand strikers from the Kacharigaon tea estate marched to the district town of Tezpur. Anticipating a police order of firing, local Congress leaders wired to the district magistrate offering their cooperation in peacefully dispersing the crowd. This offer was accepted. Congressmen stopped the strikers at the outskirts of the town and finally persuaded them to go back peacefully to their work. See O. K. Das, "Lakshmidhar-Smriti", *Banhiir Pratiddhani*, Vol. 2 (a collection of articles in Assamese, Dhekiajuli, 1968), pp. 36-37.

31. Historians of the imperialist school (Cambridge) refuse to see any idealist element of nationalism in the Congress programme of boycott, particularly that of planter-dominated local markets in Assam. One of them upholds the Government view that a vague millenarian hope was sufficient to involve many "illiterate Assamese" in the market boycott, although "the few educated Congressmen of the province" intended this as a means of cutting off Government revenue. Brown, n. 12, p. 324. See editorial *Asamiya*, 10 Dec. 1922.

neighbouring tea gardens. In many areas, a villager had to walk circuitously for several miles round a group of tea gardens to reach a destination, actually within a walking distance of a mile or two. Public roads passing through the tea gardens were of course still used by the villagers, but under sufferance. For example, there had been cases when planters would not allow bullock carts to ply along the trunk roads, lest these were damaged and turned unfit for motor traffic.

Planters had also established over the years certain racial and feudal practices in uncouth demonstration of their local powers. No Indian, certainly not a common villager, was allowed to pass through a tea estate on cycle or horse-back, or with his umbrella open, in the presence of the *Sahib*.³² Similarly, in the Non-Cooperation days, the presence of Khadi-capped Congress volunteers and villagers was not tolerated within a planter's jurisdiction. In short, there was absolutely no freedom of movement on the plantations, despite the fact that villages and plantations had inseparable market links with each other.

The resident plantation labour population were habitual liquor-consumers. They also accounted for a sizable consumption of foreign salt and cloth imported into Assam. Hence, a free entry of the Congress volunteers into plantations was essential for the movement. But the planters would not allow the Non-Cooperators to propagate swadeshi and temperance in the coolie lines or even in the tea garden bazars. Under the circumstances, a direct clash of Non-Cooperators with European planters was unavoidable. The only way out for the Non-Cooperators was to boycott the tea garden *hats* and bazars and to establish new market-places under popular control in their vicinity. This they did with great enthusiasm since April 1921.

In the districts of Darrang, Sibsagar, Syhlet and Cachar, one of the main planks of the Non-Cooperation movement was this boycott of market-places, located in European tea estates, and the establishment of rival bazars and *hats*. Although there was nothing unlawful about this activity, prohibitive orders were issued by the Government in most cases to nip them in the bud. For example, the Non-Cooperators at Behali in the district of Darrang attempted to force a

32. For instances of racist and feudal practices of planters see *Indian Echo* (Calcutta), 1 March and 23 August 1886; *The Mussalman*, 14 Sept., 1926; speeches by R. K. Hatibarua, N. C. Bardaloi, S. Barua, and L. Barua 13 Sept. *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7, Part 11, pp. 1249-69; "Gaonlia ali aru cah kheti-yak", (In Assamese), *Asamiya*, 1 May 1927 cited *ibid*, pp. 1041-4.

boycott of the *hat* of Bedeti T.E. on 13 April 1921 and successfully turned back a number of carters and others. On the next *hat* day, prominent Non-Cooperators attended the *hat* and, on being suspected of fomenting trouble, were turned out of the tea estate. Non-Cooperators started a rival *hat* on the same day at about a mile's distance. The district magistrate thereafter issued an injunction under Section 144, IPC, prohibiting any rival *hat* within four miles of the Bedeti *hat*. It was only rarely that such attempts did not invite official wrath. The successful establishment of the rival Bakata *hat* in the vicinity of Mahkhuti T.E. in the district of Sibsagar deserves mention in this respect.³³

A couple of questions yet remain to be answered. With so many meeting-points between villagers and plantation workers, how did the Congress and labour interact upon each other? What was the attitude of the Congress towards the strikers in the plantations, and *vice versa*?

Congress circles were as much alarmed as the administration itself at the sight of the growing number of plantation strikes. Congressmen did not want to get involved into them and persistently tried to disown them. When there was a strike in Halem T.E. in March 1921, the Government suspected that it might have been inspired by the Congress agitation that was going on in the neighbouring villages. In fact, Chandranath Sharma had addressed a Non-Cooperation meeting at Ghahigaon, not far from Halem, and according to police sources, it was attended by numerous garden labour. However, the suspicion was not well-founded. Years later, Omeo Kumar Das (1895-1975), a Congress leader who was present in this meeting, confirmed that Sharma had scrupulously avoided in his speech any criticism of the planters in relation to their labour. When there was yet another wave of labour troubles in Sonajuli, Kacharigaon, Dhendai and a few more tea-gardens in the Rangapara Circle in October, the Tezpur District Congress Committee even offered its co-operation to the district magistrate for pacification of the striking labour.³⁴

33. Reply to Dalim Bora, 21, Sept. *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2; Barthakur, n. 9, p. 96; *ALECR*, n. 15, pp. 19-20.

34. Interview with O. K. Das, n. 8.

"After arrest of some labourers on charges of rioting and assaults, all the labourers of a few gardens in Rangapara area marched to Tezpur town when we offered cooperation with the Govt. in persuading them to return to the gardens".—O. K. Das to A. Guha, n. d., in reply to the latter's letter of 5 Sept. 1973. See also n. 30.

The general attitude of Congressmen towards plantation strikes in those days is best illustrated by the reminiscences of Padmanath Barthakur—a Non-Cooperator. He writes of his memorable experience in one instance, as follows:

“A group of workers met me at night. Aggrieved with the Bar-sahib, they wanted to stop work, and I was approached to show them the way. On hearing this, my heart was almost frozen. It was not long ago that some sixty coolies were thrown into the jails, because of a strike in Suntak T.E. of the same Assam Company. It turned out to be a terrible sort of development as a result of which all the white Sahibs and the entire supervisory staff, who had grayed their hairs on the garden service, managed somehow to flee the garden alive. That is why it was but natural that the very mention of a strike would send a shiver down my body, and my mind was indeed filled with surfeit of repentance. Why, at all, did I enter amidst the tea garden workers, without having considered the *pros* and *cons*?”³⁵

Barthakur explained to the workers the inevitable, violent consequences of a strike and advised them to adopt softer means like a deputation to the management for redress of their grievances. In this particular case, their grievance was that they were not being allowed to purchase food stuff from the newly established Bakata hat. Eventually the management yielded to the peaceful pressure. Barthakur could thus avoid an inconvenient situation for himself.

Rural Congress volunteers, who had to come into daily contact with the sprawling labour population in course of their temperance and swadeshi propagation, could not but sympathise with the strikes. Despite ideological reservations and vacillations, occasionally they even made a common cause with them in the fight for freedom of movement and human dignity. In January 1922, there was even a short-lived movement in Cachar to enlist tea garden coolies as Congress volunteers.³⁶ The attempted boycott of tea garden bazars

35. Quote and citation from Barthakur, n. 9, pp. 83-84 and 96, Translation ours.

36. *ALECR*, n. 15, p. 19.

After a wave of lightning strikes in three gardens of the Doomdooma Tea Company in September 1920, there were rumours, according to the police, that the Dibrugarh bar “intend defending the coolies arrested in connection with the disturbances at Doomdooma free of cost”—“Assam police Abstract of Intelligence 1920”, No. 663 Assam S. B., 9 Oct. 1920 in the *OEHF*M. Gauhati.

by villagers in the Brahmaputra Valley was a spontaneous reaction to European planters' insulting behaviour towards the Gandhi-capped volunteers.

There is sufficient evidence in both the Valleys to suggest that the oppressed labour was deeply impressed by the nationalist movement and looked forward to the Congress for help in their cause. On one occasion, a number of coolies of Belsiri T. E., who had come to Tezpur to file their complaints with the district authorities, also paid a visit to the local Congress camp. Ex-coolies turned cultivators, often provided the link between Congressmen and tea garden workers. For example, Arjun Ghatowar, an ex-coolie of Dibru-Darrang T.E. used to come to the Congress office at Dhekiajuli, and he attended several Non-Cooperation meetings held in the surrounding villages. Never was he encouraged by the Congress to hold any meeting in the said garden or to tell his fellow labourers to come out of their garden. Yet, at his own initiative, he held a meeting and, according to the district magistrate of Darrang, "was found inciting the garden labour force, nominally to eschew opium and liquor, but in reality to strike work". He was arrested and convicted to six months' rigorous imprisonment. Both at the time of his trial and after the expiry of his prison term, he was openly acclaimed as a Congress volunteer.³⁷

In many cases, local Congressmen reciprocated the workers' urge for united action against the common enemy. This was too obvious not only in the case of the Chargola upheaval, but also elsewhere. "Though there is no evidence that the major outbreaks were instigated by political agitators" wrote the district magistrate of Darrang,

"there is evidence that one or two subsequent incidents connected with tea gardens have received encouragement from the Congress Party... and there is no doubt that the activities of the volunteers in the villages created an atmosphere which was favourable to the occurrence of strikes and outbreaks among ignorant coolies".³⁸

Omeo Kumar Das however writes in a defensive tone:

"My statement is that there had been no instruction to encourage exodus of labour from the gardens. I had been the Secretary

37. Written evidence of the district magistrate of Darrang cited, *ALECR*, n. 15, p. 15. Also, O. K. Das to the author, n. 34.

38. District magistrate's evidence, n. 37, p. 15.

of the Tezpur District Congress.... Of course, we cannot deny that the tea garden labourers were affected by the surrounding Indian situation. A spirit of militancy had been roused by the N.C.O. movement.... For myself, as a worker and an office-bearer of the Congress, I can say that there was no instruction to call out the labourers from the tea gardens".³⁹

Reservations of the Congress were understandable. Several of its local leaders—Kuladhar Chaliha, Jadavprasad Chaliha (1897-1964), even N. C. Bardaloi—were planters themselves. Many were socially and matrimonially related to planter families. Besides, strikes—as a working-class form of struggle—were not on the Congress agenda. Ideological reservations prevented the well-organised Non-Cooperation movement and the spontaneous strike wave from being welded into a single, unified movement. What happened came closest to such a development only in the Surma Valley. Even there what was achieved was far from a conscious multi-class, anti-imperialist front.

It was *hartals*—not strikes—that suited the Congress ideology and its organisation best. As a non-class form of mass struggle, *hartals* had their appeal to everybody, particularly to the tradition-bound artisans and other petty-bourgeois sections, as well as to broad chunks of the backward working classes who still maintained their village nexus and had no class organisation of their own. Such a *hartal*, when called nation-wide on 17 November—the day the Prince of Wales landed in India—was a remarkable success at Gauhati. A police eye-witness account of the Gauhati *hartal* brings out the inner strength and popular base of the Congress, as follows:

"The non-cooperators succeeded in organising somewhat effective hartal today. The carters, garhiwallas, barbers, sweepers, coolies, milkmen etc., all joined in the hartal. Most of the railway, steamer and motor coolies did not attend to their works today, and the works had to be managed with difficulty. At the end of the day 300 working people assembled at Phookan's compound and wanted him to explain to them Gandhiji's message".⁴⁰

It is also interesting to note that T. R. Phookan, as president of

39. Letter from O. K. Das, n. 34.

40. Quote from CID Sub-Inspector's report cited in Confidential Home (Pol.), 1924, n. 1.

the Gauhati Town Congress Committee, addressed a meeting of the town's prostitutes on 5 September 1921 to explain the objectives of swaraj.⁴¹ Thus, Congress had its own ways of reaching the masses with its message of swaraj—a message of hope and love for the depressed and downtrodden. In this mission, it did not hesitate to take advantage of social and religious gatherings. It even encouraged non-secular, obscurantist traits in the movement, such as the communal concern for Khilafat. Nevertheless, through the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920-22, the Congress opened the flood-gates of mass politics as much in Assam as in the rest of India.

NON-COOPERATORS FACE MOUNTING REPRESSION

Two Facets of the Movement

As the spirit of defiance was spreading like wild fire to every segment of society, particularly to the urban and rural poor, the Government could no longer remain complacent with its heretofore soft policy. Control of the movement even by frequent promulgation of Section 144, IPC and action under the Press Act (1910) was becoming increasingly difficult.

The Non-Cooperation aspect of the movement as such was not so visibly prominent in the Surnia Valley, over-shadowed as it was by the Khilafat movement since the middle of 1921. The Congress and Khilafat Committees had the same office-bearers in most cases. Nevertheless it was the fanatically religious Ulema who provided the basic inspiration. The Jamiat-ul-Ulema of the Surma Valley held its third annual conference at Karimganj on 13-14 November 1921, with Maulana Abdul Munaweir, president of the Assam Provincial Khilafat Committee, in the chair. There, in the presence of an estimated gathering of eight thousand visitors, about 259 Ulema jointly presented a unanimous *fatwa*, thereby lending support to and offering service for the cause of Khilafat. In Sylhet and Karimganj, Muslim tailors held meetings in their mosques and pledged that they would no longer sew foreign cloth for their customers.⁴²

41. "History-sheet of Tarun Ram Phookan", n. 1.

42. *The Mussalman*, 25 Nov. 1921.

Mohammad Abdulla (1895-1955), a lawyer of Sylhet, was the secretary of the provincial Khilafat Committee. He remained a nationalist throughout our period and was elected to the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly in 1954. N. Gupta Chaudhury, ed., *Shrihatta Pratibha* (Sylhet, 1961), pp. 15-16.

The plight of the Turkish Sultan in the distant Middle East often appeared to be a matter of greater concern for Muslim politicians than the battle for swaraj as such. Nevertheless, the 'holy' alliance between Congress and Khilafatists worked towards a common anti-British front that temporarily outwitted the colonial 'divide and rule' policy.

In the Brahmaputra Valley, however, it was the Congress Non-Cooperators who dominated the field. Their concentrated attack on the official excise policy was no less a matter of concern for the Government. For, due to the temperance propaganda, an effective picketing and modifications forced upon the official excise policy, both the consumption of opium and the excise revenue of the province recorded a sharp fall, as is shown below.

PROVINCIAL EXCISE STATISTICS: 1920-24
(Includes Manipur since 1921-22)

Total	1920-21	1921-22	1922-23	1923-24
Excise Revenue (Rs. 1000)*	7535	6158	5681	6225
Opium Revenue (Rs. 1000)	4412	3917	3586	3810
Opium Consumption (mds)	1615 (100)	1048 (65)	998 (62)	884 (55)

*Includes opium revenue.

Source: *Excise Statistical Tables for the Province of Assam* (Shillong, 1927), pp. 96-97 and relevant annual reports of the Excise Deptt., Govt. of Assam. The consumption figure for 1923-24 is from *ACOER*, n. 1, p. 45.

It was because of the agitation that the share of excise in the total provincial revenue decreased from about 40 per cent in 1920-21 to less than 30 per cent by 1923-24.⁴³ Besides, the Non-Cooperators continued to do useful work by bringing into existence the village *panchayats* to take suits out of the law courts.

Repression let loose

The Government of Assam became somewhat nervous after the National Congress had adopted the deferred programme of Civil

43. *ACOER*, n. 1, p. 45.

Disobedience on 4 November 1921. In the absence of the pre-conditions as laid down by Gandhiji in the province, the Pradesh Congress Committee decided against any such civil disobedience in Assam. Not prepared to take any risk, the Government nevertheless resorted to a policy of ruthless oppression. The Criminal Law Amendment Act, kept long in abeyance, was now promulgated in Assam on 21 November 1921, making picketing practically illegal. Several organisations like the Congress Volunteer Corps and the Khilafat Volunteer Corps were declared unlawful under this Act.

N. C. Bardaloi and T. R. Phookan, among others, were arrested on 30 November and Kuladhar Chaliha, on 11 December. Many more arrests followed. On 18 December 1921, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, in his telegram to the Government of India, reported that the Khilafat meetings had pernicious effect on the fanatic rural masses and that Section 144, IPC was inadequate for tackling the situation. The Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act (1911) was therefore introduced in Sylhet on 23 December and later, in the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, excluding Nowgong, on 31 January 1922. Declared a disturbed area on 23 December, Boko was subjected to a punitive levy. A platoon of the Assam Rifles was stationed there. Cachar and Nowgong were also brought soon under the operation of the Act. Tabarak Ali and Shyama-charan Dev (1870-1961) of Cachar were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment in March 1922.⁴⁴

People were not easily cowed down. In several areas, they were even thinking of raising the movement to a higher phase by refusing to pay the land revenue rates in the ryotwari areas and *chaukidari* taxes in the zamindari areas. For example, in the *mauzas* of Haleswar and Mahabhairab in Darrang, an action in the form of refusal to pay land revenue rates was being discussed by some ryots. This was not on the agenda of the Pradesh Congress and, hence, nothing perhaps could have come out of this flutter. At least this was what the local Congress leaders believed. However, the *mauzadars* concerned came to Tezpur and raised a hue and cry, merely to exhibit their anti-Non-Cooperation zeal. They returned to their respective *mauzas* on 21 January 1922 with an escort of batches of armed police.⁴⁵ Preparations for a refusal to pay land revenue were also

44. Chaliha's speech, n. 10, pp. 471-2; GI Home (Pol.), File No. 533, serials 1-7 and 11, 1922, NAI; *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 86 and 790-8; Confidential Home (Pol.), 1924, n. 1; *The Mussalman*, 3 March 1922.

45. *The Mussalman*, 3 Feb. 1922, supplemented by O. K. Das, n. 8.

made by Congressmen at some selected places like Boko in south Kamrup.⁴⁶

Between 23 December 1921 and 8 May 1922, as many as three dozen select areas (*mauza*/police station/town ward) in the plains districts were declared disturbed. Inhabitants of these places were subjected to collective fines (about Rs. 0.2 million in all) to pay for the deployment of additional police forces, included nine and a half platoons of the Assam Rifles (see Appendix 11). Loyal citizens were of course exempted from this levy. Demonstration marches of the Assam Rifles were conducted in the districts of Sylhet and Sibsagar. In Goalpara, the Assam Rifles was called in by the Forest Department to eject politically undesirable persons from some forest villages of Kochugaon. In Kamrup, too, Assam Rifles marched through some villages.⁴⁷

These measures were deemed necessary principally to check such activities as 'seditious' meetings, fund collections in aid of unlawful associations, intimidation of villagers willing to attend tea garden *hats* and the influx of 'trouble-shooting' rural volunteers to the towns. People did not always remain non-violent. A collaborating *mauza-dar's* house was reportedly burnt down in a village of Sibsagar. One police inspector and two sub-inspectors of the same district were assaulted. The Government reacted fiercely. The police forcibly dispersed a youth procession at Jorhat on 3 January 1922, for singing revolutionary songs 'noisily'. The Congress office premises in many places of Sibsagar district were either burnt down or demolished under official orders. Even a big pandal constructed for a religious performance was burnt down on 23 January on the plea of forestalling a seditious meeting.^{47a}

There were signs of agitation even amongst the beneficiaries of the Government. Out of the province's 118 title-holders, two

46. K. N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Gauhati, 1958, reprinted 1969), p. 57.

47. *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 790-1; speech by Kuladhar Chaliha, 12 March, *ALCP* (1925), Vol. 5, p. 404; *The Mussalman*, 23 June 1922; reply to Dalim Bora, *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, p. 300.

In all forest villages, the villagers were expected to provide the Forest Department with *begar* or unpaid labour. In 1921 the ryots of the Kochugaon forest in Dhubri subdivision stopped supplying *begar*, under the leadership of Pratapchandra Brahma, a Boro-Kachari peasant. They were all served with eviction notices, and a unit of the Assam Rifles was called in to push them out. The *begar* system finally had to go.—"A note on his reminiscences by Pramathanath Chakravarti to Mahadev Sharma" in the *OEHFM*, Gauhati.

47a. Same as n. 48.

relinquished their titles by September 1921. Several police constables and many Government employees resigned their jobs. Two Government pensioners, Nilkanta Barua and Krishnakanta Bhattacharyya, were penalised for actively supporting the movement. Bhattacharyya was the editor of the *Assam Bilasini* (Jorhat) which had ceased publication, following a security demand of Rs. 2000/- in April 1921. Similarly victimised under the Press Act (1910) were the *Janashakti* (Sylhet) and the *Surma* (Silchar). The weekly *Asamiya* (Dibrugarh) was fined on a defamation charge. The most serious and tragic police action, however, took place at Kanairghat in the Surma Valley. In a police firing on an angry crowd there on 15 February 1922, six people were killed and 22 wounded—all Muslims. One Hindu police constable was also found dead from an accidental same-side gun shot. The Kanairghat tragedy, and the subsequent police atrocities in the area, aroused province-wise indignation.⁴⁸

Even as people were boldly facing repression, the Congress working Committee—following the tragic Chauri Chaura incident—called off the mass civil disobedience movement by its resolution of 12 February 1922 at Bardoli. Although the provincial Congress Committees were later permitted to carry on individual civil disobedience on a limited scale, the surging movement soon subsided in Assam and elsewhere. A constructive programme that included the popularisation of the *charkha*, the setting up of national schools and the eradication of untouchability was put forward before the people. In March 1922, Omeo Kumar Das placed before the AICC an account of the unprecedented police repression in Assam. Thereupon Rajendra Prasad and M.M. Malaviya visited Assam—Boko in particular—in May, the same year.⁴⁹

Thousands had participated in the upheaval of 1921-22. Statistics relating to the militant plantation workers undergoing jail terms or put under arrest are not available. Estimates are, however, available for the total number of persons who had been to jails in connection with the Non-Cooperation. It was officially stated that, between 24 November 1921 and 31 January 1922, 477 Non-Cooperators in the Brahmaputra Valley and 20 in the Surma Valley were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. According to one estimate, 996 persons including 22 lawyers of the Brahmaputra Valley

48. Reply from Govt. bench, *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 93-94, 556-62, 793 and 798; speech by R. K. Hatibarua, 4 April, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 462-3; *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, 428 and 523; Dutt, n. 46, pp. 61 and 63n.

49. Dutt, n. 46, p. 65.

were convicted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act alone upto 30 March 1922. According to the *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report*, about 1,100 persons of the same Valley had gone to jails in connection with the movement. K. N. Dutt estimates that more than 4,000 people in the province as a whole had entered the jail precincts in response to the Non-Cooperation cause.⁵⁰

Statistics available on the daily average of the jail population of Assam, including convicts, under-trials and civil prisoners, show that the number increased from 2,656 in 1921 to 2,915 in 1922 and then came down gradually to 2,357—a normal level—in 1924. The increase in 1922 was chiefly due to the Non-Cooperation movement.⁵¹ There were 38 national schools in Assam with 1,908 scholars in 1921-22.⁵²

Local Reaction to the Bardoli Retreat

The sudden withdrawal of the movement did not go unprotested in Assam. Chandranath Sharma, the real founder of the Congress movement in the Brahmaputra Valley, was then on his death-bed, suffering as he was from consumption. He was shocked to find Gandhiji developing a 'religious mania' since November 1921 and mixing up political issues with those of religious morality. Neither the Calcutta resolution on Non-Cooperation nor its Nagpur variant was loaded with any such moral or religious values. These resolutions simply laid down that swaraj was to be attained by all legitimate and peaceful means. How was it then that Gandhiji later defined Non-Cooperation as a process of purification? In anguish, Sharma wrote to a friend on 22 February, bringing out the irrelevance and emptiness of the Bardoli decision and the Gandhian tactics. Expressing the desire that his letter be published in one of the Congress organs, he wrote:

"... I am stunned after receiving the Congress Working Committee Resolutions of Bardoli.... The fact that the Congress is not a religious body is known pretty well by Mahatma Gandhi. ... If this Non-cooperation movement is entirely a religious and spiritual movement, then why did he not say so at the very

50. *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, p. 507; T. Chaliha's estimate, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, n. 13; *ACOER*, n. 1, p. 29; Dutt, n. 46, p. 61.

51. GI, Reforms Dept., File No. 76/27—special notes on jail population in Assam (1921-26), NAI.

52. P. C. Bamford, *Histories of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movements* (Delhi, 1925), p. 104.

outset? In fact in order to purify Indian people and initiate them to the religion of non-violence, there was no need of non-cooperation with the British Government. Nor was there any need of fighting with that Government to achieve the sort of independence he now wants to give Indians”.

Sharma did not at all relish Gandhiji's giving top priority to the untouchability programme; rather he wanted the political movement to continue in a do-or-die spirit, in the face of all consequences.⁵³ After the collapse of the movement, the Government of India found it opportune to put Gandhiji under arrest on 10 March. Broken-hearted, Sharma died on 20 July 1922, at the age of about 33. Assam was meanwhile completely submerged under a prolonged spell of Gandhism.

T. R. Phookan was released from jail on 25 November, 1922. “We could not complete our *sadhana* for swaraj”, said Phookan in a Gauhati meeting immediately after his release “and that is why we could not obtain it”. Bardaloi was released a few months later. Both devoted themselves to constructive work. Released on 1 July 1922, M. Tayyebulla and about forty non-cooperating college students—mostly Hindus—joined the teaching staff of Jamia Millia, Aligarh, on receiving an invitation from Maulana Mohamed Ali in September.⁵⁴ By the end of 1922, it was all quiet. With the revolutionary overthrow of the Turkish Sultan from his throne and consequently also from the altar of Khilafat, the Khilafat movement as such came to an end.

Reforms as By-Products of the Movement

The short-sighted policy of bringing in religious issues to politics did not pay any dividend in the long run. The way the agitation was suspended laid bare the ideological weakness of the movement, beside setting in demoralisation among the ranks of freedom fighters.

The Non-Cooperation movement was nevertheless able to create a revolution in expectations by turning the Congress into a mass political platform. In Assam, the movement was crowned with success at least in one respect. It forced the alien Government to modify its

53. Dandinath Kalita, *Karmmabiir Chandranath* (In Assamese, Tezpur, 1846 *saka*), p. 92; quote from Chandranath to Durganath Barua, dated Puri, 22 Feb. 1922, reproduced, *ibid*, pp. 93-97. Translation ours.

54. Confidential Home (Pol.), 1924, n. 1; *ACQER*, n. 1, pp. 56-57. M. Tayyebulla, *Between the Symbol and the Idol at Last* (New Delhi, 1964), p. 46.

opium policy. Even as the Non-Cooperationists agitated, the Government introduced such measures as would eventually lead to a gradual decline of opium consumption in Assam, with a watchdog legislature never allowing it to forget its commitment.

Another by-product of the movement was perhaps the immediate official action to expedite the reformation of the local bodies. For this purpose, a revised set of rules under the Local Self-Government Act of 1915 were introduced on 3 January 1921, and the Assam Municipal Act was passed in 1923. The franchise related to the local boards was extended and was made identical with that of the Assam Legislative Council. But thereby the principle of separate electorates for election to the local boards was also, for the first time, adopted through the backdoor of the Government's rule-making authority.⁵⁵ Thus Muslim middle class elements, who claimed to champion Muslim interests, were able to achieve for themselves a political gain which the hard-pressed provincial Government was, too, ready to concede for tactical advantages.

The proportion of the elected to total members in the local boards considerably increased after the reform. For example, out of the province's 380 local board members in 1922-23, 47 were ex-officio, 69 nominated and the remaining 264, or 69.5 per cent, elected members. Besides, the local boards were now allowed to elect their own chairmen. Whereas all but one local board chairman were officials in 1920-21, 13 out of 19 local boards had elected non-official chairmen in 1922-23.⁵⁶

The Government of course continued to exercise considerable external control through its nominees on these boards, as well as through its rule-making powers—audit and inspection. The Non-Cooperation movement had little effect on these bodies, except for the fact that several individuals were removed from membership on conviction. So was the case with municipalities in general. In the case of one municipal board alone, all the non-official members resigned in a body following a disagreement between its chairman and the district magistrate in connection with Gandhiji's visit to the town.⁵⁷ Thus, through extended institutional opportunities, the Raj was able to win over, or at least neutralise, a section of the local

55. V. Venkata Rao, *A Hundred Years of Local Self-Government in Assam* (2nd. edn., Gauhati, 1965), pp. 206-7.

56. Reply to S. Barua, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 151.

57. *Indian Constitutional Reforms: Views of Local Governments on the Working of the Reforms dated 1927* (London, 1928), pp. 495 and 521.

elite that was itching for a fringe share in the power structure. Even Non-Cooperators thought it expedient not to boycott local bodies as a matter of general policy.

ROLE OF THE FIRST REFORMED COUNCIL: 1921-23

An anatomy of the House

The Reformed Council came into its existence in the face of an organised poll boycott (1920) and, as such, comprised only of loyal and opportunist elements, who were hardly representative of even the educated classes. Amongst its fifty-three members, there were a dozen planters of whom five were Europeans. Besides, there were quite a few zamindars and *mauzadars* among the elected representatives. The Governor had questioned the eligibility of *mauzadars* for election, since they had a quasi-official status. However, his opinion was over-ruled by the Secretary of State for India and by the British Parliament, in the process of constitution-making.

Of the fifty-three Councillors, only thirty-three were elected from general Muslim and non-Muslim constituencies—sixteen from each Valley, and one from the Shillong Urban Constituency. Another six elected members represented such special interests as tea, commerce and industry. The Governor nominated twelve members, including not more than seven officials. Apparently, the Reformed Council had a safe non-official and Indian majority. However, since at least twenty-seven members were required to form a majority party—undoubtedly a difficult proposition—the elected European planters, together with official and nominated members in their trail, continued to exercise substantial influence in the House.⁵⁸ With vested economic interests and a stake in the administration, the European and nominated Indian members together formed the Government party and lent their support to the otherwise shaky 'popular' ministers.

The legislature's functions expanded under the Act of 1919. Budget proposals were henceforth placed before the House with full details for an item-wise discussion. An item of expenditure, if refused

58. Governor's address, 22 Feb. *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, pp. 1-6; for composition of the first Reformed Council *ibid.* pp. 11-13; Governor's address, 16 August, *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 696-704.
The Reformed Council had its first meeting on 22 February 1921.

by the Council, could no more be incurred by the executive Government. In exceptional circumstances alone, the Governor could restore the cut at his discretion by way of certification. Besides, certain items of expenditure were withheld by the Act itself from the vote of the Council. These items amounted to about 25 per cent of the total provincial expenditure.⁵⁹

A Public Accounts Committee was set up to see, with the aid of the Audit Department, that the voted grants were spent as intended by the Council. Supplementary questions could now be put by any member. The right to move adjournments was also conceded, but this right was not exercised before the formation of the second Reformed Council. The first President of the Council to be appointed was, of course, a European. After his premature retirement in 1923, Rai Bahadur Nalinikanta Dastidar (1875-1945), a Sylhet zamindar, was appointed President. The legislature had an elected President only from 1925 onwards.⁶⁰

As in other provinces, the dyarchy in operation in Assam had two wings of its executive Government—(i) the administration of transferred subjects and (ii) the administration of reserved subjects. Two ministers, supposedly responsible to the legislature, were to advise the Governor on the administration of the transferred subjects. The reserved subjects were entrusted to two executive councillors, who were not responsible to the legislature. In administering these reserved subjects, the provincial Government was responsible only to the Government of India. The area of transferred subjects was more limited in Assam, to begin with, than in other provinces. The departments of public works, excise and fishery were gradually transferred there only after 1925-26; excise, as late as in 1926-27. Transferred departments accounted for only 30.2 per cent of the total budgeted expenditure of 1927-28 and 36.7 per cent of that of 1935-36.⁶¹

The position of a minister under the system was unenviable. He was appointed and dismissed by the Governor; but his pay was fixed by the Council. There was an embarrassing convention that he would not open out his mind in the Council on points of difference with his colleagues in the Government. Besides, executive councillors

59. Governor's address, 16 August, *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 696-704.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Speech by Sadananda Dowerah, 26 March *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 123-4; A. J. Laine's reply to R. K. Chaudhuri, 1 March *ALCP* (1935), Vol. 15, p. 287.

had precedence of rank over the ministers. The Governor, executive councillors and ministers usually met together once a week. This arrangement worked rather too well. For, the *Statesman* (Calcutta), the mouthpiece of British capital in eastern India, editorially commented on 5 June 1929 :

“... In Assam’s happy hills there is no doubt that Dyarchy has succeeded, for the delightful reason that it has never been tried. There, if nowhere else, the Government has been really one, not a collocation of two committees, in one row of chairs. Assam’s Legislative Council has seen no distinction of Right and Left on the Government bench. Immediately on appointment Executive Members and Ministers forget their difference of origin; and with the Governor they form a *panchayat* working the Government as a matter of mutual arrangement...”.

If the dyarchy functioned like this in Assam till 1929, it was more so during the years 1930-36, with a Council without the Congress-Swarajists.

Timid Performance

Working within the constraints of a sham constitutional framework and lacking a popular base, the first Reformed Council could not but play a colourless and subservient role. It even assumed an anti-national role when it passed unanimous resolutions in September 1921, welcoming the Prince of Wales to India and conveying a message of loyalty, homage and profound gratefulness to the King-Emperor.⁶² A few of the Council members like Gohain-Barua, Nilmoni Phukan, Dalim Bora and Krishnasundar Dam no doubt condemned eloquently in their speeches the police excesses let loose upon the Non-Cooperators. However, they considered it safe to do so only after recording their disapproval of Non-Cooperation. “Sir, it is needless to say that we fundamentally differ from the non-cooperation in our political opinions”, said Gohain-Barua on 14 March 1922, “or we should not have been here”.⁶³ Nilmoni Phukan, then

62. *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, pp. 479-80. There were *hartals* in Assam’s towns on the day the Prince of Wales landed in India. To make amends for this ‘sin’ of his countrymen, Bholanath Barooah—the millionaire timber-merchant—donated funds to establish a technical institute at Jorhat to be named after the said prince.

63. *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, p. 109.

an elected member, generally voted with the Government on all vital political issues. He said in the same budget session next day:⁶⁴

“What we want most at this moment is larger sympathy and recognition of people’s aspiration for higher and freer life. I do not consider British connection a necessary evil, nor the sole outcome of ‘merchant adventurers’. This connection has come to stay for the good of both Englishmen and Indians”.

The first Council failed to pass even a perfunctory resolution recommending political prisoners’ release and the withdrawal of repressive laws, despite the fact that such resolutions had been passed by other provincial Councils after the suspension of the movement. Dalim Bora moved such a resolution on 28 March 1922, but he had to withdraw it for a lack of support. He took pains to explain that his object in moving the resolution was really not to create unpleasantness, but to pray for the release of political prisoners under the changed circumstances. On more than one occasion, Dam delivered inspired speeches, condemning colonialism and upholding the Non-Cooperation movement. One could however legitimately suspect that he was playing to the gallery, with an eye towards the next election.⁶⁵

Thus, the little flutter that was created in the Council through interpellation and speeches on the issue of repression was rather marginal. “The fact that we eventually had no option but to take action is recognised by this Council’s vote of yesterday”, the Governor gleefully told the Council on 14 September 1922, “when you, gentlemen, gave us the money for which we asked for the exceptional expenditure incurred on the movement of the Military Police which were required to reassure law-abiding people and to restore respect for authority in the perturbed areas”.⁶⁶

The first Reformed Council’s record of legislative output was conspicuously poor. The only measure of importance was the Municipal Act, 1923, containing provisions for separate electorates in municipal elections. Notices were given for as many as 186 resolutions. While 164 of these were admitted and moved, as many as 83 were withdrawn, 39 lost through a voice vote or division and only 42

64. Phukan’s speech, 15 March, *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, p. 226.

65. Speeches by Bora and Dam, 28 March, *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 534-44.

66. Governor’s address, 14 Sept., *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 817-9.

carried. Again, out of a total of 1,608 questions put in the Council, 1,442 were admitted; of these, 1,400 were answered.⁶⁷

Interpellation and cut motions generally related to such issues as primary education, need for a university, the burden of grazing taxes and the excise policy. For example, despite the Government opposition, J. J. M. Nichols-Roy's (1884-1959) resolution recommending the introduction of opium rationing and personal registration of opium-eaters, with a view to eradicate the evil from Assam within ten years, was passed by the Council on 22 March 1921. The Government refused to implement the time-bound programme, but agreed to take "such steps as are immediately possible and practicable" to give effect to the Council's wishes. It further agreed to open a register of opium-eaters.⁶⁸ The first Reformed Council also forced twelve cuts in the budget demands. However, two of these cuts were restored fully and one partially, under the Governor's certificates.⁶⁹

The Council deliberations reflected a disagreement between the majority of its members and the Government on the issue of land revenue re-settlement in the temporarily-settled areas. The land revenue demand used to be periodically revised every ten years or so till the early years of the present century. The last re-settlement was made during 1905-12, for a period of twenty years. As the settlement was now about to expire, the Government decided to commence another re-settlement operation in the districts of Kamrup and Sibsagar to start with. But scared of increased taxation, the Reformed Council opposed re-settlement and, on 14 August 1923, refused to vote the required funds for these operations. The Governor restored the funds.⁷⁰

The Government was convinced of the urgency of tenancy legislation in Sylhet, but wanted it to be preceded by the preparation of records-of-right. With that end in view, a bill was introduced in September 1921. However, because of a determined opposition from the landlord lobby, its consideration was postponed *sine die* on the vote of the Council. In Goalpara, some spade-work was done in the form of local enquiries into tenancy conditions by A. J. Laine,

67. *Indian Constitutional Reforms...*n. 57, p. 509.

68. *ALCP* (1921), Vol. 1, pp. 71-72.

69. *Indian Constitutional Reforms...*n. 57, pp. 522-5.

70. Governor's address, 16 Aug., *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, pp. 703-4;

ALCP (1924), Vol. 4, p. 88 and *ALCP* (1925), Vol. 5, p. 988.

Under Section 72 D(2) (a) of the Act of 1919, a total amount of Rs. 1,52,656 was certified by the Governor as a necessary expenditure for resettlement operations.

who was appointed Special Officer on Duty in 1916.⁷¹ On the basis of his report in 1917, there was a talk of extending the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885, to Goalpara. Because of local zamindars' opposition, the idea was eventually dropped. The Governor then proposed to go on with the preparation of records-of-right in Goalpara; but this idea, too, was abandoned due to financial stringency. The only reform so far carried out by the executive was the extension of Sections 150, 151 and 152 of the aforesaid Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885, to the district.⁷²

Official attention was drawn also to the unsatisfactory conditions of tenants in the temporarily-settled district of Cachar. A bill was prepared for this district and dropped in 1913. On 9 January 1922, J. E. Webster, an official, submitted yet another draft tenancy bill for Cachar. The Government decided to slightly remodel his bill so as to make its provisions applicable to all temporarily-settled areas of the province. The remodelled bill was published on 30 May 1922, but it was finally dropped on the plea of its chill reception by the so-called 'public'.⁷³

In Goalpara, some tenants refused to pay their rents under the inspiration of the Non-Cooperation movement. The tenants in Ghura Pargana, for example, stopped paying rent to the Raja of Gauripur in 1921, until an amicable settlement was reached over the disputed rent enhancement.⁷⁴ The Assam Landlord and Tenant Procedure (Amendment) Bill 1922 was officially sponsored as an emergency measure to help the zamindars. It was to be applied in case of necessity only to select areas of Sylhet and Goalpara, after due notification in advance. The bill aimed at giving district magistrates power to decide rent refusal cases in a summary fashion. Sylhet zamindars gave their full support to the bill. But many Councillors, including P. C. Datta (1869-1950), opposed it on grounds of principle as well as procedural technicalities. One member even pointed out that tenants were not at all represented on the Council. On 29 March 1922, a private motion recommending circulation of the bill

71. On the question of rent claimed by zamindars for forest produce, the tenants of the Bijni and Parbatjoar zamindars carried on a struggle in 1915 and 1916. "A note on his reminiscences by Pramathanath Chakravarti", n. 47.

72. Reply to A. M. Ziaosshams, 29 July, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 552.

73. Speech by R. K. Chaudhury, 21 March, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 732; speech by Laine, *ibid.*, p. 737.

74. H. Neog, *Pramathanath Chakravarti* (In Assamese, Jorhat, 1968), pp. 18-19 and "A note...", n. 47.

for eliciting public opinion was adopted. Officials, Europeans and zamindars could together muster only 17 votes as against 21 non-official Indian votes in favour of this motion. The bill thereafter was dropped as the emergency situation passed off.⁷⁵

Birth of the Swaraj Party

After the formation of the all-India Swaraj party on 1 January 1923, a process of rethinking started also in Assam in favour of Council-entry. In July, T.R. Phookan founded the party's Assam branch, with its headquarters at Gauhati, and he resumed his legal practice in August. Reprimanded severely for his new stand in a Congress organisational meeting, Phookan resigned from the presidency of the local Congress. In September 1923, he issued his party's election manifesto. According to this document, the objects of his Council-entry programme were two-fold:

- (i) to prevent people with a bad record of repressive, anti-people activities from entry into the legislature, and
- (ii) to protest strongly against all legislation that was harmful to the people.

It was further stated that Swarajists would refuse office and would offer wholesale obstruction to all measures brought before the Council.⁷⁶ A sizable section in the Assam Congress leaned towards the Swaraj party. In the 1923 election, Phookan was returned to the Indian Legislative Assembly, and several Swarajists to the Assam Legislative Council. Out of the 39 elected members of the latter body, only 13 or one-third were re-elected members. One of the significant Swarajist victories involved the defeat of Shivaprasad Barua, the richest Assamese planter. R.K. Hatibarua (1895-1929)—a Non-Cooperator who had undergone a term of imprisonment—was the successful candidate. Another important incident was Nilmoni Phukan's failure to win the Dibrugarh seat. Both Phukan and Shivaprasad Barua, however, got their Council berths through the backdoor of nomination. It was no surprise, therefore, that Phukan would later eloquently defend the principle of nomination in the

75. *ALCP* (1922), Vol. 2, pp. 566-75.

76. Confidential Home (Pol.) 1924, n. 1; "History-sheet of Tarun Ram Phukan", *ibid.* The dossier on Phookan contains a typed English version of the Swarajya party's brief election manifesto of 1923, printed as a single-page leaflet, at the Aruna Press, Gauhati.

Council debate on local bodies, on considerations of electors' ignorance and illiteracy.⁷⁷

Thus, the politics of effective opposition inside the Council not only did triumph over the no-changers' politics of Non-Cooperation, but also over that of responsivist cooperation. Only 33,352 or less than 25 per cent of the voters in the contested constituencies had participated in the poll of 1920. But the comparable figure for the 1923 poll was 83,320 or slightly above 42 per cent;

ELECTIONS TO THE ASSAM LEGISLATURES: 1920-37

	1920	1923	1926	1929	1937
Total no. of candidates	81	89	88	n.a.	(277)
Returned unopposed	18	10	12	19	(20)
Contested seats	21	29	27	20	(88)
No. of regd. voters	2,02,400	2,24,063	2,50,751	2,88,832	(8,15,341)
Votes polled	33,352	83,320	88,707		(5,22,273)
Percentage of votes Polled for contested seats	25%	42%	43.5%		(71.3%)
Votes polled as percentage of the province's electorate	16.4%	37.2%	35.3%		(64.0%)

Sources: As mentioned in n. 78. For the last column, East India Constitutional Reforms: Elections—*Return Showing the Results of Elections in India 1937* (New Delhi, 1937), p. 5.

77. Dutt, n. 46, p. 66; *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, p. 869. In 1924 Nilmoni Phukan and Amarnath Roy, a Sylhet zamindar, were complimented as the best two parliamentarians in the House by its Leader—William Reid.—Speech by S. Dowerah, 27 Sept., *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 1366.

and for 1926, 88, 709 or above 43 per cent. The number of candidates also increased from 81 in 1920 to 89 in 1923 and 88 in 1926.⁷⁸

A review of the four general elections since 1920 clearly shows that the Congress participation in the poll did make a difference. Since 1923 the enfranchised section of the people showed relatively wider and sustained electoral interest. This is revealed by the figures in the Table on page 155.

78. *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 3; *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7, pp. 10-13; *Return showing the Results of Election in India 1923* (Presented to Parliament, London, 1924), pp. 1-18 and 78-83; *India in 1920: A report prepared for presentation to Parliament* (Calcutta, 1921), appendix 3, p. 48; East India (Constitutional Reforms—Elections), *Return Showing the Results of Elections in India 1925 and 1926* (PP. cmd 2923, London, 1927); East India (Constitutional Reforms) Indian Franchise Committee, Vol. 1, *Report of the Indian Franchise Committee, 1932* (London, 1932), p. 76.

Flexible Congress Tactics: 1924-36

ABOUT-TURN TO SWARAJISM

Second Reformed Council : 1924-26

After the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement, its constructive programme alone could no longer sustain the morale of the Congress rank and file. They had so long believed that swaraj was attainable within a year, but now began to realise that the Government machinery, particularly its legislative organ, constituted a powerful instrument of propaganda and influence. Was it not then expedient to enter the Council in order to blunt its harmful operations? The Swarajist slogan of wrecking the constitution from within became increasingly acceptable to the Congress circles. By the end of 1924, the initial Congress opposition to the Swarajists totally disappeared.¹ The latter again fully identified themselves with the Congress in Assam as in the rest of India.

With some eight of its members elected to the Assam legislature, the Swarajist party was yet not in a position to wreck the constitution. Evidently, attacks on the Government inside the Council were likely to succeed, only if the party could win the support of some independents and responsivists. Hence, it formed a coalition with other nationalists of varying shades to carry on an obstructive role in the Council. Saadulla, like Taraprasad Chaliha (1890-1948), had been elected as an independent candidate with Swarajist support. However, the expectation that he too, like the latter, would join the

1. Tarachand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. 4 (New Delhi, 1972), p. 1.

coalition was soon belied.² He preferred to work under the dyarchy as a minister, alongside P. C. Datta from the Surma Valley.

The Swarajist-Nationalist-Independent Coalition party was formed with Faiznur Ali from the Brahmaputra Valley as its leader and Brojendra Narayan Chaudhury (1880-1972), an independent member from the other Valley, as the deputy leader. The first success of the party was achieved on 25 March 1924, when Gopendralal Das Chaudhury was elected Deputy President, defeating his rival, Shivaprasad Barua, a nominated member. During the first four years, the Reformed Council had a Government-appointed President, as per requirements of the Act of 1919. The Coalition party was able to get Abdul Hamid elected as the President of the Council on 2 March 1925, immediately after the expiry of the initial four-year period.

The Swarajist strategy was to formulate a national demand in the legislature for constitutional reform and, if the Government did not respond satisfactorily, to pursue a policy of obstruction and refusal of supplies. Accordingly, Faiznur Ali moved on 25 March 1924 a resolution demanding full responsible Government. In their speeches, the Swarajists viewed the dyarchy as a total failure. Basanta Kumar Das (1883-1965) defined full responsible Government as complete Indianisation of every branch of administration along with a complete development of the self-governing institutions. Not all Coalition members did think that the dyarchy had failed. Even while supporting the resolution, Sadananda Dowerah, for example, felt that "dyarchy has succeeded in Assam beyond all measures of success". Nevertheless, in this first round of contest on policy matters, the Opposition motion was adopted by 29 to 17 votes. Amongst non-official Indian members present only three, including Nilmoni Phukan, voted against the resolution.³

By another resolution, moved by Dowerah on 27 September 1924, the House voted, 26 to nil, to ask for an immediate replacement of the dyarchy by full provincial autonomy and transfer of all reserved subjects to popular control in Assam. Faiznur Ali's resolution recommending the abolition of divisional commissionerships as an economy measure was also adopted by the House on 18 September. Attempts of the Opposition to get a committee appointed to

2. P. Barthakur, *Swadhiinata Ranar Samsparsat* (In Assamese, Dibrugarh, 1968), p. 198.

3. *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 44-85.

probe into the executive measures against the Non-Cooperation movement, however, ended in a failure in March and September sessions of 1924.⁴

Cut motions to reduce the ministerial pay had earlier ended in a failure in the first Council. However, in April 1924, the Council was able to reduce it from Rs. 3,500/- to Rs. 1,500/- per month, by a single-vote majority. The Governor accepted this verdict. Official attempts to restore the original pay and to introduce the Assam Stamp (Amendment) and the Assam Court Fees (Amendment) Bills were successfully blocked by the Opposition in September. Kuladhar Chaliha's resolution recommending immediate legislation to prohibit the consumption and sale of opium in Assam, except for medical and scientific purposes, was passed on 3 March 1925. However, soon there was a turn in this anti-Government tide. The Swarajist Coalition could no longer command a majority on several vital issues. The aforesaid two bills, related to Stamp and Court Fees, were passed on 7 March; and the ministerial pay was also fully restored.⁵ In response to the AICC's call, the Swarajists staged a walk-out from the House on 8 March 1926 as a mark of protest against the non-fulfilment of the national demands put forward by the legislatures.⁶ The Government had a smooth sailing in the last budget session of the House in their absence.

An official report on the working of the Act of 1919 revealed that a majority of the elected members considered criticism of the executive Government as their most important function, the tendency for obstruction being on the decline. Even Swarajists were willing to offer their advice on important policy matters. The attitude of the second Reformed Council towards its legislative function was, on the whole, reasonable and, except in the first year, the Government found little difficulty in obtaining supplies from it. What was a matter of greater concern was the general apathy outside the House. Its proceedings evoked little interest in the constituencies, partially because of the virtual absence of the Press in Assam.⁷

4. Ibid, pp. 471-9, 1287-1305, 1338-43 and 1365-9; *Indian Quarterly Register* (July-Dec. 1924), p. 232 (c).

5. *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 529-32 and 1197-35; *Indian Constitutional Reforms: Views of Local Governments on the Working of the Reforms dated 1927* (London, 1928), p. 507; *ALCP* (1925), Vol. 5, pp. 32-64 and 266-323.

6. *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, pp. 553-4.

7. *Indian Quarterly Register* (Jan.-June 1928), p. 160 (a)-(b). This is the same as *IAR*.

For the first time in the Council's history, adjournments were moved in 1925 to force a discussion on matters of public importance. The Report of the Reforms Enquiry Committee (Muddiman Committee) was published on 9 March 1925. While the majority viewed dyarchy as a success, the Minority Report noted its breakdown in C. P. and Bengal, and was highly critical of the reforms. Even the Government of Assam in its note to the Committee had observed that ministers had no convincing answer to their opponents' cry that "the reforms have bestowed no benefits on the electors". An adjournment was moved by Faiznūr Ali on 19 March 1925 to discuss the Report. Deliberations, in which no official participated, went fully in favour of the Minority Report. The House finally condemned the Majority Report as "retrograde, disappointing and calculated to delay the attainment of full responsible government". It recommended the adoption of such steps as would lead to the appointment of a Royal Commission or Round Table Conference for devising a suitable constitution.⁸

The second Reformed Council forced as many as 24 cuts affecting the budget proposals, as against 12 by the first one. As the cuts were of marginal order in most cases, the Government generally accepted the Council's verdict. In seven cases affecting grazing fees and land revenue collections, the cuts however were restored under the Governor's certification. For example, when the 1924-25 budget estimates were reduced by an amount of about Rs. 3½ lacs by the Council, a major part thereof under land settlement operations, police and excise heads was restored through such means. On the whole, the second Reformed Council's performance was more impressive than that of the first. It handled more business also in respect of interpellation and resolutions.⁹

Third Reformed Council : 1927-29

The twenty-sixth session of the Indian National Congress, held at Pandu (Gauhati) in December 1926, was a big event. Despite poor financial resources, Assam was able to demonstrate that the national movement had struck deep roots in its territories. The Congress

8. Ibid, (January-June 1925), p. 257; *ALCP* (1925), Vol. 5, pp. 731, 763-72.

9. *Indian Constitutional Reforms*, n. 5, pp. 506-9 and 522-5; Governor's address, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 530.

Out of 365 notified resolutions, as many as 327 were admitted, but only 123 could be moved. Out of these again, only 56 were carried; 44 were withdrawn and 23 lost. As many as 1,814 out of 1,962 questions were admitted, but only 1,755 answered.

of their grip over this local board that even its formal meetings, instead of being convened at its office premises, used to be held sometimes at the Assam Company's workshop town—Nazira, much to the disadvantage of Indian members.⁵¹

Indian Councillors like M. C. Barooah used the Council floor to expose the planters' stranglehold over the so-called 'rural self-government' and pressed for a change in favour of an elective system. They also demanded legislation for regularisation of the local boards which were, till then, functioning by virtue of an executive order. At long last, the Government introduced the much-awaited Local Self-Government Bill, 1914.

L. S. G. Act, 1915: Old Wine in A New Bottle

Democratisation of local self-government with a broad-based franchise was obviously not amongst the ostensible purposes of the Act. Nor was the political movement of the day committed to such a principle. The articulated demand was for elected representation of only the educated and propertied classes on all local bodies so that they could—within certain limits—influence the decision-making process at the local level. As a member of the Select Committee on the bill, M.C. Barooah agreed with the Government that the boards "need not be necessarily a representative body of all sections and interests". The Assam Association, of which he was the general secretary, was "decidedly of opinion that property qualification is the only qualification which should be recognised in forming the electorates".⁵² Even so, he found the relevant provisions of the bill unsatisfactory. "There ought to be a well understood principle of allotment of seats" he said *inter alia* in a note of dissent "according to the amount of payment of Local Rates...".⁵³

Another reactionary feature of this bill was the continued provision for appointed chairmen, except in a few special cases permitted by the Chief Commissioner. The *Eastern Chronicle* (Sylhet) voiced opinion for modification of this provision and deplored the fact of too much official interference.⁵⁴ Chanda moved an amendment to

51. Barooah's questions on 19 March and Govt's reply thereto, *ALCP* (1913), No. 4 and again on 13 March, *ALCP* (1914), No. 11 (sic!), pp. 22-23.

52. Articles on the bill in *Eastern Chronicle* (Sylhet), 5 Dec. 1914 and 19 Dec. 1914 cited in *L-S-G. A—June 1915*, Nos. 43-44, pp. 11-3. (AS). The quote is from a memorandum submitted by M. C. Barooah, gen. secy. of the Assam Association, to the secy. of the ALC, dated 1 March 1915, *ibid*.

53. Note of dissent by Barooah, cited in 13 March, *ALCP* (1914), No. 2, p. 161.

54. *Eastern Chronicle*, 5 Dec. and also 19 Dec. 1914, n. 52.

provide for an elected chairman invariably for all the boards and was supported by T. R. Phookan and Saadulla. However, it had to be withdrawn in the face of stiff European opposition.⁵⁵

From 1905-06 onwards the rural population had indirectly elected representation on all local boards, but in a perverse manner. Government-appointed village headmen called *gaonburhas* continued to elect the rural representatives, despite an increasing public protest.

Government's intention was to provide a system under which rate-payers would elect their own representatives to the village authorities, village authorities to the local boards, and local boards to the provincial Legislative Council. But as there were no such village authorities in existence in Assam Proper other than the *gaonburhas*, the provisions of the bill were self-defeating. The bill provided that "the village authority shall consist of a member or members appointed or elected in accordance with such rules as may be prescribed" in future. This clause was clearly permissive of the continuity of *gaonburhas* in Assam proper and of the *Chaukidari Panchayats* (formed under the Act of 1870) in Goalpara and the Surma Valley as the sole rural electors for an indefinite period. Chanda moved an amendment that such a village authority be plural and elected. This motion, too, had to be withdrawn to avoid a miserable defeat in terms of votes.

Amendments moved by Chanda and Gohain-Barua to make the representation of various sectional interests proportionate to their respective contributions towards land revenue and/or local rates, as far as practicable, were also defeated. So was the fate of other amendments except a few of minor significance. Some were withdrawn to avoid voting. Chanda, a lawyer of eminence, virtually emerged as the informal opposition leader during this debate. It had begun with spirit and earnestness, but sagged towards the end while being dragged on through the empty forms. Chanda pathetically said on 15 March 1915:

"...as our proceedings commenced and as the discussions which were placed before the Council by us were taken up one by one, the process of evaporation of our hope commenced and by the time the voting on clause 37 was taken, it reached almost a vanishing point".⁵⁶

55. 13 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 2, pp. 61-67.

56. K. K. Chanda's speech on 15 March, *ALCP* (1915), No. 2, p. 84.

Yet he decided to go through the rest of the ritual and moved the amendments still standing in his name, one by one.

The bill was enacted almost in its original form, without any division at its final stage. Gohain-Barua did not miss the opportunity at the end of the debate to express his gratitude to the Chief Commissioner and President of the Council, "for having succeeded in giving a legal basis to our local boards—the first seminaries of political education for us in this country". All, however, did not agree with him in considering the L. S. G. Act as "a great boon conferred upon this poor province..."⁵⁷ The debate opened the eyes of several moderates who, in subsequent years, were to take increasingly a bolder stand.

Continued Struggle for Local Board Reforms

The Assam Association, in its annual session at Dibrugarh in December 1915, as well as at Gauhati in December 1916, passed resolutions expressing its concern over the continuation of *gaonburhas* as the rural electors for local boards. Government admitted the unsatisfactoriness of the situation and hoped to replace them soon by duly constituted village authorities. G. S. Barua, on 17 October 1917, again expressed his concern over the delay in the formation of village authorities. On 25 April 1917, both Chaliha and Barua reiterated that the distribution of local board seats between different sections should be related to their respective contributions towards direct taxes and that the non-official chairmen should be tried at least in some select local boards.⁵⁸

The last attempt in the Council to abridge the over-representation of the planters on local boards by a resolution was made by G.S. Barua on 12 January 1918. His speech on this occasion was one of the best in the Council's annals. He sharply pointed out that the planters were wanting in local knowledge and, except in the matter of communications, also in local interests. "The claim of tea-planters...is intrinsically based on their being agriculturists and payers of local rates and my point is that" said Barua "their representation should be proportionate to the local rates paid by them...". He was

57. Gohain-Barua's speech on 9 April, *ALCP* (1915), No. 3, p. 116.

58. Chaliha's question on 13 March, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2, pp. 13-16 and the replies thereto.

Reply to Gohain-Barua, 13 March, *ALCP* (1916), No. 2, pp. 2-5. G.S. Barua's questions, 17 Oct. *ALCP* (1917), No. 3. *ALCP* (1917), No. 2, pp. 118 and 120.

of other landlords and 15,847 acres as direct settlement-holders under the Government, according to official sources. At the same time the immigrant, land-hungry peasants from East Bengal, of whom an estimated 85 per cent were Muslims, started settling down in their thousands since about 1905 on the uninhabited riverine tracts. According to the birth-place data of the 1911 Census, immigrants from adjacent Bengal districts numbered only 51,000 in Goalpara and 3,000 in Assam proper in that year. By 1921 altogether 141 thousand East Bengal immigrants had settled down in Goalpara and 117 thousand in Assam proper. The number of East Bengal settlers, together with their children in the Brahmaputra Valley, was estimated at 300 thousands by the Census authorities in 1921.⁶³

Marwari traders and even Assamese mahajans of Barpeta provided a substantial part of the necessary finance to enable the immigrant peasants to bring virgin soil under the plough. With their superior techniques of cultivation, these East Bengal peasants taught Assam how to grow jute, *mung* (a kind of pulse) and several other crops. For example, the acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased, as a result of this great population movement, from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-06 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-20.⁶⁴ A steady influx of Nepali graziers into the Brahmaputra Valley led to an increased cattle population and milk production. The number of Nepal-born persons in Assam increased from 21,000 in 1901 to 88,000 by 1931. All these factors were conducive to an overall economic growth. Between 1900-01 and 1920-21, the population of Assam proper increased by 41 per cent. The comparable gross cropped acreage under ordinary cultivation increased 54 per cent and the acreage under tea 29 per cent.⁶⁵

Besides, the belated impact of tea garden markets for farm products was found somewhat favourable to the local peasant economy. For, under the changed conditions, ex-tea garden and immigrant Bengali wage-labour were now available to an increasing extent in the neighbourhood of labour-short Assamese villages. This relative prosperity was not necessarily shared by all, and it was once more threatened by the post-war depression in the tea industry around

63. Ibid. pp. 582-4. Griffiths, n. 62, p. 304.

Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report 1921-22 (Govt. of Assam, Arbuthnott Committee) p. 23.

64. Guha, n. 62, Table 8 on pp. 600-1.

65. Ibid, p. 584 and Table 7a on p. 610.

1920. Economic and political struggles broke out in both the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys in the wake of the first world war.

Conditions of Peasantry

Nearly four thousand Manipuri tenants of a zamindar of Pargana Bhanugachh (Bhanubil) in Sylhet rose in revolt and killed two of his employees in 1900. The Manipuri peasantry of the district, numbering some 20,000, raised a fund to defend the accused in the court and got them released.⁶⁶ Nothing more is known about peasant struggles of the period under review here. Perhaps the peasant movement was not sufficiently widespread so as to attract the attention of the administrative reports and the press. At the time of resettlement in Assam proper in 1905, lessons of the 1892-93 Settlement were not forgotten by the administration. Hence the revised rates of assessment were, on the whole, relatively light and did not lead to any peasant unrest. The average rates, were reportedly decreased two per cent in Kamrup and increased six per cent in Sibsagar, although prices of farm products had considerably increased meanwhile.⁶⁷

In the absence of any specific tenancy legislation for the ryotwari areas, the landlord-tenant relations there were being regulated by contract, local custom and the principles of natural justice.⁶⁸ In the zamindari areas, the total lack of occupancy rights for the tenants was already becoming a cause for concern for the Government, as well as the enlightened middle class. During 1897-1917, a large number of memorials and petitions were presented to the Government of Assam by the zamindari tenants of Goalpara. These were occasionally supported by an agitation in the local press. On 15 November 1915, the Garo ryots of the Raja of Bijni in Goalpara sent a memorial to the Government against acts of zamindari oppression. Both M. C. Barooah and P. D. Chaliha suggested that the Bengal Rent Law of 1869, in force then in the district of Goalpara, be suitably amended to ameliorate the conditions of the zamindari tenants.⁶⁹ Sonaram Sangma, a Garo, emerged as a leader of the tenants' struggle against the Bijni Raj, which was at its peak

66. *Shrihatta Pratibha*, n. 4, p. 19.

67. R. K. Chaudhuri's speech on 19 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 873-4.

68. Reply to Chanda's Question, 7 March, *ILCP* (1917), cited on 25 April, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2.

69. Barooah's speech on the budget on 5 April 1911, *EBALCP* (1911), No. 3, p. 110. Chaliha's question on 13 March, *ALCP* (1916), No. 1. Editorial comment on the Bijni Raj, *Times of Assam* (Dibrugarh), 6 Nov. 1915 cited by Chaliha, *ibid.* Also A. J. Laine, D. C. of Goalpara on Special Duty, *An Account of the Land Revenue System of Goalpara : with Criticisms of the Existing Rent Law and Suggestions for Its Amendments* (Shillong, 15 March, 1917), pp. 14-35.

during 1907-1916. There was a simultaneous agitation in the zamindari estates of Gauripur, Mechpara and Parbatjoar as well. Tenants' agitation in Parbatjoar was led by Kalicharan Brahmo.⁷⁰

The official concern for the tenants' rights appeared to be conspicuously deeper than that of the Legislative Council itself, packed as it was with landholders. When the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1869, was being modified in Bengal itself in 1882, a similar amending bill was actually drafted in Assam. But as there was allegedly no articulated demand for it in the areas where sub-letting was rampant, the bill was dropped. As early as 1913, a bill on tenancy rights was again prepared for the district of Cachar, but it was dropped in the absence of any organised public opinion there in its favour. In 1916, the district magistrate of Goalpara was appointed on special duty to report on the defects of the 1869 Rent law, then in force in his district. His report, based on intensive local enquiries, was submitted in 1917 and accepted by the Government, but the contemplated legislation was postponed pending a regular resurvey and resettlement. It thus appears from later discussions in the Reformed Council that the pressing need for a suitable rent law was cold-stored. The Government did not like to antagonise the zamindars and landlords.⁷¹

Conditions of Plantation Workers

As a result of the recommendations of the Assam Labour Enquiry Report of 1906, certain changes were introduced in the legal position of the plantation workers. The planter's private power to arrest his workers was abolished in 1908. The labour districts of Surma Valley and lower Assam since 1908, and the remaining districts since 1915, ceased to be subjected to certain repugnant provisions of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901. A time-expired labourer, while still in Assam, could no longer be asked to sign yet another periodic contract under the Act of 1901. Under the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1915, further recruitment of tea labour through contractors and *arkattis* was made unlawful, and the tea garden Sardars were made the sole recruiting agents. In response to the new situation, the organised tea interests came forward and

70. Peasant agitation in Goalpara was directed both against zamindars and jotdars. Demands were raised for the issue of proper rent receipts, abolition of illegal cesses, grant of occupancy rights and protection against rent enhancements. Laine, n. 69, pp. 4 and 21-25.

71. Speech by Laine on 21 March, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 736-7.

formed the Tea Districts Labour Supply Association in 1917 to control and coordinate recruitment under the Sardari system. By 1920 it had complete monopoly over the supply of labour to the tea industry.

But this could not put a stop to the practice of enticing time-expired labourers to a fresh contract under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859. This, too, provided for imprisonment for a breach of contract. In fact this Act had already, to a large extent, replaced the Act of 1901 even before its repeal by the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1915. Penal labour contracts therefore continued to be there very much as before. It was not before 12 March 1920 that the 1859 Act was modified to eliminate the penal provision.⁷²

The official reports regarding workers' conditions on the plantations were revealing. An example is the report for the year 1917-18. The estimated number of children of school-going age on the plantations was two hundred thousand, but not even two per cent of them went to any kind of primary school. Wrote a European D.P.I. of Assam in his report for the year:

"Education steadily goes back in the tea gardens. The number of schools has fallen from 149 with an enrolment of 3,615 to 142 with an enrolment of 2,888 (these are only lower primary schools). The decline is in the number of 'C' class schools—i.e., schools maintained by the planters themselves."⁷³

Apparently, the average monthly wage earnings of Rs. 8.09 per man and Rs. 7.59 per woman, including diet rations, subsistence allowance and bonus in 1917-18 showed a slight improvement as compared to 1905-06.⁷⁴ But in real terms much of it was eroded by the rising prices.

In many tea gardens even the above rates were not available to the workers, as will be discussed later. Although the period from 1905-06 to the end of the war was, on the whole, one of prosperity for the planters, troubles did nevertheless take place in the gardens. Even during the war years, the semi-slave or semi-serf

72. Griffiths, n. 62 pp. 281-92.

ALECR, 1921-22, n. 63, p. 102.

73. D. P. I. of Assam, Report for 1917-18, p. 21, quoted by N. C. Bardaloi in "Condition of labour in the tea gardens of Assam", *India* (London), 14 Nov. 1919, p. 188.

74. Official figures cited by Bardaloi, *ibid*, p. 187.

status of plantation workers remained essentially as deplorable as in the days of Cotton and Fuller. Himself a petty planter, beside being a lawyer-politician, N. C. Bardaloi reported in 1919:

“A tea garden is like a small town by itself, with the barracks for labourers and the stately bungalows of the managers and their assistants. Nobody, not even the policemen can enter this kingdom without the manager’s permission. A manager may assault a labourer, insult him, and take girl after girl from the lines as his mistress, yet there will be none to dispute his action or authority. It is only at sometime when the manager’s cruelty surpasses all bounds that the labourers set upon him and assault him. Had it not been for the fear of Britishers and the guns and pistols they possess, and the fact that at their beck and call all the constabulary and magistracy of the district would come over there and punish the labourer, rioting would have occurred pretty frequently in these small dominions”.⁷⁵

Economic Struggle : Intensification Under War Strains

The period from 1905-06 to the end of World War I was one of high dividends, rising prices and relatively low wages. As the economic conditions of the labouring people tended to worsen, they were spontaneously drawn into partial struggles from time to time. According to official sources, out of 210 reported disputes between the planters and their workers during the period from 1904-05 to 1920-21, as many as 141 were cases of rioting and unlawful assembly.⁷⁶ These often ended in violence. In the year 1917-18, planters or their assistants were directly assaulted by labourers in as many as six disputes. Moreover, 172 contract-bound workers deserted their jobs. Warrants of arrest were issued against forty-seven plantation workers in that year, but of them only twenty-six could be arrested.⁷⁷

For a million-strong plantation labour population, these figures no doubt appear insignificant; but since relevant official reporting was deficient, these need not be taken at their face value. As the war was approaching its end, the discontent against rising prices culminated into an outburst of economic struggles and attacks on the established order in the plantations and elsewhere. It commenced with the queer phenomenon of a wave of *hat-looting*.

75. Ibid, p. 187.

76. *ALECR*, 1921-22, n. 63, p. 89.

77. Bardaloi, n. 73, p. 187.

In early 1918, the forbidding price of even the 'standard cloth' on sale caused wide-spread resentment and spurred a wave of looting of the rural *hats*. Having started in Bengal, the wave spread eastward, reached Sylhet and, finally, the western border of the Hailakandi subdivision of Cachar. S. P. Desai of the Indian Civil Service, then in charge of the subdivision, thought it to be the handiwork of anti-social elements and took stern measures, such as exemplary flogging of the culprits, to stop its further advance. Although he claimed success in dealing with the trouble, it was too complex a social phenomenon far beyond the understanding of a young civilian. For the same phenomenon also appeared in Assam proper with equal vehemence in reaction to high prices of salt, cloth and foodstuff. Several persons in this connection were sentenced to long-term imprisonment there.⁷⁸

A month-long strike at the Government Press in Shillong in August 1918 forced the *Assam Gazette* to cease its publication temporarily.⁷⁹ The next important strike was by the workers of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways in July 1920 on the demand for a 50 per cent wage increase. The 10 day-old strike was withdrawn only after a 30-35 per cent increase in all wages below Rupees 100 per month was agreed upon. This led to a wave of lightning strikes in the neighbouring plantation area. One-day strikes took place in three gardens of the British-owned Doomdoo Tea Company in Sibsagar, one after another, on 6, 15 and 25 September in protest against bad and inadequate rice supplies. On the last-mentioned day, three Marwari shops were also looted by the strikers. Workers in two tea gardens of the Pabhojan Tea Company, also British-owned, struck work on 21 and 22 September, respectively. They demanded an increase in their cash wages, from Rs. 6 to Rs. 8 per month, and also in the cheap grains supply, from 6 *seers* to 8 *seers* per week. The workers of Hookanguri garden of the British-owned Assam Frontier Company struck work on 27 September and raided a near-by *hat* for cloth and rice. In October there were swift and sudden strikes in three

78. S. P. Desai, "My Thirty-five years in Assam" in K. L. Panjabi, ed., *The Civil Servant in India* (Bombay, 1965), p. 62. Author's interview with Desai at Poona on 4 April 1973. Speech by R. B. Das, 6 April, *ALCP* (1918), No. 3, p. 131; 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4; Chaliha's speech, 13 March, *ALCP* (1919), No. 1, pp. 35-6.

79. *Times of Assam*, 18 August 1918 and also 31 August 1918 cited on 5 Oct., *ALCP* (1918), No. 4, p. 162.

"India of today, having rendered such valuable services both in men and money during this disastrous war in Europe, reasonably deserves a recognition of all these and that in the shape of raised status in the British Empire like her sister colonies..."⁸³

The spread of the Home Rule movement all over India, Gandhi's appearance on the political scene in 1915 and his successful experiment of a peasant *satyagraha* in Champaran against European indigo-planters, the irrepressible vitality of the dedicated bands of terrorists in some provinces, President Wilson's general advocacy of the right of self-determination of the nations and, above all, the far-reaching impact of the Russian Revolution—all these combined in 1917 to highlight India's demand for self-government.

To meet this rising tempo, the Government of India adopted the double-edged policy of appeasement and repression. On the one hand, an increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration as well as "progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire" was declared on 20 August 1917, as the goal of the British policy.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the notorious Sedition Committee, presided over by Justice Rowlatt, was appointed on 10 December 1917 to enquire into the revolutionary movement and make recommendations to deal with it effectively.

Montford Reforms and Rowlatt Acts

In such a political situation alongside people's increasing concern over the rising prices, the middle-class leaders of the national movement vacillated between the acceptance of the anticipated reforms and their total rejection. Nevertheless the Joint Report on the Constitutional Reforms, published on 8 July 1918, was called "disappointing and unsatisfactory" by the Special Congress session at Bombay in August. Speaking on a resolution on the Reforms proposals in the Imperial Legislative Council on 6 September 1918, K. K. Chanda expressed his dissatisfaction with the Report and pleaded for the appointment of a committee to examine and modify the scheme. He stressed that nothing short of executive responsibility to the Legislative Council would satisfy the Indian public.⁸⁵

83. Speech by Das, 25 April, *ALCP* (1917), No. 2, p. 123.

84. Quoted by M. Jha, *Role of Central Legislature in the Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi, 1972), p. 38.

85. Speech by Chanda on 6 Sept. *ILCP*, April 1918-March 1919, pp. 113-5.

There was also a sharp reaction to the Rowlatt Committee's Report and the two bills introduced in the legislature on the basis of its recommendations. While opposing the Criminal Law (Emergency Powers) Bill in the Imperial Legislative Council, Chanda said on 6 February 1919:

"Now my Lord, you are going to give us reforms and side by side with them, and in fact, even before them, you are going to give us this repressive law. Will that pave the ground for the reforms in this country? If this measure is passed it is bound to create considerable agitation".⁸⁶

Almost all the 185 amendments moved by the Opposition fell through. The bill was passed into an Act, with all the 35 votes in its favour being cast by Europeans and all the 20 votes against it by Indians.⁸⁷

Gandhiji's initial favourable response to the Reforms was turned into a determined hostility to the Raj in the wake of the Rowlatt Report. After the passage of the Rowlatt bills, he started an all-India *satyagraha* agitation on 30 March 1919 in order to prepare the country for resistance to these lawless laws. A general *hartal* was called on 6 April, and this was to be followed by civil disobedience. Thus the 'considerable agitation' Chanda had warned against gathered momentum. The massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in its wake on 13 April 1919 raised the national anti-imperialist movement to a higher pitch. The Amritsar Congress of 1919, however, still debated over the tactics to be adopted vis-a-vis the Reforms, as Tilak was in favour of responsive cooperation. The Congress finally ended with a compromise resolution in favour of giving a fair trial to the reforms, as and when they were introduced.⁸⁸

The Government of India Act, passed by the British Parliament on 23 December 1919, however, fell short of the Indian aspirations. On the international plane the peace treaties of 1919 belied the war aims of the Allies and the 'fourteen points' of President Wilson. The dismemberment of Turkey roused hatred amongst the Muslim masses of India against British imperialism. In November 1919 Gandhiji

86. Speech by Chanda on 6 Feb. 1919, *ibid*, p. 81.

87. *Ibid*, p. 1192.

88. Jha, n. 84, p. 43.

was an active participant in the first Khilafat Conference. It was from this platform that he was soon to declare Non-Cooperation. Moderates thought it wise to split from the National Congress so that they could pursue a softer line, and they set up the National Liberal Federation of India in 1920. Within this frame of all-India political developments, Assam politics were undergoing a rapid change.

Assam Demands Major Province Status

Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, came to this country to ascertain the Indian opinion in November 1917. A delegation of the Assam Association pleaded before him in Calcutta on 6 December for the political advancement of Assam on a par with the major provinces. A similar delegation from the Surma Valley, representing both Hindus and Muslims and led by Abdul Karim (1863-1943), a member of the Bengal Legislative Council by virtue of his domicile there, also urged upon Montagu not only for constitutional advancement but also for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. In December 1917, the Sylhet Peoples' Association submitted a memorandum to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for the incorporation of their district into Bengal. The question was also brought up in the Imperial Legislative Council early in 1918 by Chanda in the form of a general resolution, recommending the constitution of linguistic provinces. It was however negated.⁸⁹

The re-emergence of the Sylhet question on the eve of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms was inevitable. At this time the theory of self-determination of distinct nationalities was gaining ground not only abroad, but also in India—particularly Assam. The Calcutta Congress session of 1917 was attended by a thirteen-member delegation from the Brahmaputra Valley—all representing the Assam Association, and nearly forty delegates from the Surma Valley. It was in this session that the Congress for the first time conceded the principle of linguistic provinces for purposes of its own organisation, in Andhra and Sind to begin with. The old demand for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal attained a new significance in this context. Chanda and others issued a public appeal in 1918 to renew the demand. The demand for a reconstituted Bengal on the basis of the linguistic

89. Bardaloi's speech, 17 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 802-3; Questions and Replies, 13 March, *ALCP* (1918), No. 2; Letter from Govt. of Assam, No. Pol.—1917-5587, dated 30 Oct. 1924 cited in Jan., *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, pp. 51-52; Chanda's speech, *ILCP*, April 1917 to March 1918, Vol. 56, pp. 492-5.

Civil Disobedience : Second Phase

Under the impact of the Great Depression, the ryots in Assam, as elsewhere, were in pitiable conditions in the first half of the thirties. In temporarily-settled areas of Assam, the cumulative arrears of land revenue went on mounting from year to year as follows:

LAND REVENUE IN ARREARS
(Accumulated)

On 1 July:	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933
Rs. (lacs):	2		7	21	36	37

The outstanding arrears of land revenue as of July 1, 1932 amounted to about 37 per cent of the current land revenue demand.⁵⁰

Processes issued for the attachment of defaulters' movable properties increased in number from 81,958 in 1932-33 to 98,122 in 1933-34. In the latter year, distress warrants were issued in as many as 160,000 cases. The number of defaulting estates, put on sale by the Government in an attempt to realise the dues, also increased from 41,734 to 59,215 in these years. Eight small tea gardens of the Brahmaputra Valley, similarly put on sale for default of land revenue, had to be purchased by the Government at Re. 1 each, for lack of bidders. In 1933-34, the ratio of realised land revenue to the total demand in Assam was only 63.7 per cent. Altogether 3,394 annual and periodic pattas of revenue defaulters were annulled in this year in the Brahmaputra Valley alone. Because of the depression, there was a year-to-year heavy fall in the revenue collection, particularly from such sources as land, excise and forests. The provincial excise revenue gradually slid down from Rs. 6.5 millions in 1929-30 to 3.4 millions by 1933-34.⁵¹

It was in such an acute economic situation that the Civil Disobedience Movement was again launched in Assam in response to the Working Committee's (AICC) call to the nation on 1 January

50. Governor's address, 12 Sept., *ALCP* (1932), Vol. 12, p. 761, for the years 1928-32; *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 1216, for the year 1933.

51. A. J. Laine's reply to S. Barua on 6 and 7 June, *ALCP* (1935), Vol. 15, pp. 1127 and 1173; speech by Prichard on 26 Feb, *ibid.*, p. 130; Abdul Hamid's reply to Keramat Ali on 5 June, *ibid.*, p. 1063; Memorandum of Assam Legislative Council to the Chairman of Joint Select Committee of Parliament, dated 14 Sept. 1933, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 1184.
The Council was informed of the sale of tea gardens on 10 March 1934—*ALCP* (1934), Vol. 14, pp. 278-9.

1932. Determined to suppress the movement brutally, the Government of Assam promulgated the Prevention of Molestation and Boycott Ordinance on January 9. The APCC was then constituted of B. R. Medhi, J. Chaliha, Dhaniram Talukdar (1888-1971), Hemchandra Baruah (1893-1945), Omeo Kumar Das and Beliram Das—most of them lawyers by training.⁵²

On 26 January, meetings to take the independence pledge and processions were held all over the two Valleys. In Sylhet, 17 persons sustained injuries from police attacks. Twentyfour persons in all were arrested on that day and jailed for terms varying from six months to two years. Sylhet and Goalpara were declared notified areas under the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance on 1 and 23 February, respectively. The Unlawful Association Ordinance was progressively brought into force in Sylhet, Kamrup and Goalpara during the span of 5-12 February. Important leaders in both the Valleys were imprisoned. Processions were forcibly dispersed in many places, throughout the month of February⁵³. Even N. C. Bardaloi, who had kept himself aloof from the first phase of the movement, was arrested on 13 April for hoisting a national flag in his own compound and for violating Section 144. Released the same day, he was re-arrested on 26 April and thrown into the jail. Several thatched huts, belonging to him, were taken possession of by the police to prevent their use for the Congress cause, and his motor car was publicly auctioned. Amongst others, Bhubaneswar Barua was also arrested. In the midst of this turmoil, the second Assam Provincial Political Conference was held in June 1932 at Jorhat, presided over by the Satradhikar of Garmur.⁵⁴ The Surma Valley Political Conference held its ninth session at Sylhet on 27 June 1932.⁵⁵

According to official sources, altogether 1,494 persons were arrested upto 31 August in connection with the 1932 movement in Assam. Of them, 1,076 persons including 80 women were convicted till mid-August. The APCC's own estimate was that no less than 1,700 persons were arrested in the 1932 movement. Amongst those

52. "APCC Report 1933 on C. D. Movement of 1932", *APCC papers*: Packet No.—35; Saadulla's statement, *ALCP* (1932), Vol. 12, pp. 690-4. Hemchandra Baruah was the most dynamic organiser of the Assam Pradesh Congress ever since its inception. Though he had his degree in law in 1925, he never practised.
53. Saadulla's statement, *ALCP* (1932), Vol. 12, pp. 690-4.
54. *ALCP* (1932), Vol. 12, pp. 1075-8; "APCC Report, 1933 on the C. D. Movement of 1932", in *APCC papers*, Packet No. 35; Chaudhury, n. 43, *Barua and others*, pp. 82-84.
55. N. Gupta Chaudhury, comp., *Shrihatta Pratibha* (Sylhet, 1961), pp. 235-6.

convicted and imprisoned were—to mention only some—Chandraprava Saikiani, Gahanchandra Goswami, Purnachandra Sharma (b. 1900), Hemchandra Baruah, Mahendramohan Chaudhury (b. 1908), Bejoychandra Bhagavati (b. 1907), B. N. Chaudhury, B. K. Das, Rabin Navis, Bimalaprasad Chaliha (1912-1971), Sudhansu Banerjee and three young poets—Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-51), Hemanga Biswas (b. 1912) and Dhirendrachandra Datta (1912-72). More than one-third of those arrested or convicted in Assam were from the district of Sylhet. In terms of arrests and convictions, the subdivisions of Tezpur, Golaghat and Gauhati also suffered badly. In Tezpur and Gauhati, the police force had to be deployed to protect persons engaged in land revenue collection. North Lakhimpur and Cachar subdivisions were only marginally touched by the movement. An APCC report on the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932 later stated:⁵⁶

“True it is that Assam has not been able to take up no-tax campaign. But the incapacity of the Rayats—to pay up their taxes forced Government into an automatic no-tax campaign. The attachment and auction of property went on everywhere”.

Collapse of Civil Disobedience

In the wake of the communal award of 10 August 1932 and the Third RTC (17 November to 24 December 1932, London) came the White Paper of 15 March 1933. It, more or less, endorsed the Simon Commission's recommendations, but also contained a deferred scheme of federal Government, to be implemented only after a requisite number of native states had accepted it. A Joint Parliamentary Committee was formed in April 1933 to consider those proposals. Drafted on the basis of the Committee's report (October 1934), the Government of India Act of 1935 was passed by the British Parliament on 4 August.

The communal award was based on the theory that India was not a nation, but a heterogeneity of unintegrated communities. The award made the Hindus immediately apprehensive of British motivations in driving a wedge between the depressed classes and other Hindus. Gandhiji's protest fast unto death in September forced the

56. Two statements of Saaddulla on political arrests and convictions, *ALCP* (1932), Vol. 12, pp. 1079 and 1091; for information on prisoners mentioned, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 301, 404, 557 and 692-3; “APCC Report, 1933, on C. D. Movement of 1932” n. 52.

leaders of the two sections to reach an agreement in favour of joint electorates, with more than proportionate seats reserved for the depressed classes, and this settlement was accepted by the British Government. Released on 8 May 1933, Gandhiji temporarily suspended the mass Civil Disobedience, to the utter dismay of his followers. In a joint statement, V. J. Patel and Subhas Chandra Bose referred to Gandhiji's failure as a political leader. "The time, therefore, has come" they said "for a radical reorganisation of the Congress on a new principle with a new method, for which a new leader is essential".⁵⁷

In the face of such criticism as well as the adamant British attitude, the movement was revived in the form of individual civil resistance during the period from August 1933 to March 1934. However, on 7 April Gandhiji finally advised Congressmen to suspend their individual resistance. His ten-day tour of Assam that ended on 20 April passed off quietly. In Assam, the Civil Disobedience Movement as such had already petered out even long before that date. Congressmen were divided among themselves as to the next course. Some felt that participation in Councils was warranted by the situation. Others like B.N. Chaudhury publicly stated that the cause of independence could not be served through Councils any more. The AICC meeting at Patna in late May finally decided to contest the ensuing national elections. In the autumn of 1934 Gandhiji resigned his Congress membership and yet remained the most powerful behind-the-scene influence, ready to act whenever needed. Triennial elections to municipal and local boards passed off peacefully in Assam in May 1934. In some districts Congressmen contested, but with no marked success. The ban on the Congress in Assam was lifted on 13 June.⁵⁸

G. Das Chaudhury, who had resigned his seat in 1930, won a by-election and was sworn in as a Council member on 11 September 1934. In November 1934, N. C. Bardaloi scored a victory over T. R. Phookan in the election to the Indian Legislative Assembly from the Brahmaputra Valley. Similarly, B. K. Das was elected from the other Valley. The Muslim seat was bagged by Abdul Matin Chaudhury, a Muslim Leaguer. Thus, once more the Congress came back into the fold of parliamentary politics, with the intention of

57. Cited by Tarachand, n. 1, p. 186.

58. M. Jha, *Role of Central Legislature in the Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi, 1972), pp. 198-200; 'Fortnightly reports on the political situation', April 1934 onwards, Home Political—Files No. 18-4-34 to 18-8-34 (NAI).

opposing the British policy from within the legislatures. In view of the impending constitutional change, no fresh election to the Assam Legislative Council was, however, held till the end of 1936. The fourth Provincial Political Conference, held on 6 December 1936 at Becheria (near Tezpur), gave out the call for capturing the legislature in order to wreck the constitution from inside. Presiding over the open session attended by about 1100 people, Bhulabhai Desai explained the strategy of poll participation without accepting the constitution as such.⁵⁹

NEW DIMENSIONS OF STRUGGLE

Birth of a Peasant Movement

The economic depression of the thirties was so widespread that the phased Civil Disobedience Movement tended to grow into an anti-imperialist mass revolt. Gandhiji was determined to keep it non-violent and, therefore, halted it twice before its final suspension. Nevertheless, the movement channelised social and political activities into new directions. The eleven-point charter of demands that Gandhiji had raised in the 1930s included the demand for a 50 per cent reduction in land revenue rates. This caught the imagination of the people of Assam.⁶⁰

A number of local peasant organisations were either newly started or re-activated during this period with such demands as reduction and remission of land revenue, distribution of agricultural loans, abolition of cart tax and the like. These organisations at the grass-roots level were not necessarily politically oriented. For instance, in 1931 the Konwarpur (*Mauza*) *Hitasadhini Sabha* raised a demand for remission of land revenue. The Cachar *Zilla Krishak Sammilani* which held its third annual conference on 1 February 1931, with Khan Sahib Rashid Ali Laskar, M.L.C., in the chair, was also a non-political gathering. It was attended by some three thousand people. The *Ryot Sabhas* all over Assam proper had, on the other hand, close links with the Congress, particularly in Tezpur, Sibsagar and Jorhat subdivisions. The first session of the Chhayaduar *Rayat Sannilani* was held at old Gomeri on 13-14 June, with the Satradhikar of Garmur in the chair and an attendance of nearly

59. Police Dept., Shillong : Special Branch, File No. B-2(17)36 of 1936.

60. *Krishna Sharma's Diary*, n. 13, p. 186.

six hundred people. During its discussions, the conference resented the execution of Bhagat Singh, the stoppage of the pension of Harekrishna Das—a retired nationalist civil surgeon—and the enhancement of land revenue rates. The All-Assam Ryot *Sabha* was formed in 1933 to consolidate the movement. About two to three hundred local Ryot *Sabhas*, organised on the basis of *mauza*, district etc., were federated into this All-Assam Ryot *Sabha*. Its first two annual conferences were held at Tilikiam (near Jorhat) and Dergaon in 1933 and 1934, respectively. The *Sabha* included both Congressmen and others. This body adopted a formal constitution, fixed a membership fee of one anna per year and held annual conferences. The proverbial saying—‘the ryots themselves are the sovereign’ (*raijei raja*)—now assumed a new meaning and became a popular slogan. The main demand of the Ryot *Sabhas* was a 50 per cent reduction in the land revenue rates.⁶¹

There was also a *Krishak Sammilani* (or *Samiti*) in Goalpara subdivision since 1933 which used to represent local grievances, particularly those of the tenants of the Mechpara zamindari estate from time to time. This *Krishak Sammilani* was reorganised as an allied Congress body in 1935.⁶² Its first sitting, attended by 15,000 people and presided over by Omeo Kumar Das, was held at Balbala. Its second sitting was held at Dudhnai next year, with G. N. Bardoloi in the chair.⁶³ This ryot *sabha* movement came to an end after the Defence of India Rules were promulgated in 1939.

In 1932-33, the unorganised tenant cultivators of Kamrup peacefully agitated for the grant of occupancy rights through suitable legislation. Out of some 1,89,000 acres of Nisf-Khiraj (half revenue paying) land in the province, about 1,35,000 were concentrated in that district. Besides, some 18 per cent of the Khiraj (full revenue-paying) lands there were also sublet. There was so far no legislation for regulating the landlord-tenant relations. For want of occupancy

61. Ibid, pp. 203-4 and 249-52; *ALCP* (1931), Vol. 11, pp. 537, 562 and 954; *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 951-2;

“Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence 1931”—No. 1076 Assam S. B., 27 June 1931 and “Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence 1936”—No. 339, Sibsagar, 25 March 1916. *OEHFM* Gauhati.

62. The so-called ‘Nikhil Goalpara Krishak Samiti’, in its address to J. Nehru on 29 November 1937, claimed itself to be three years’ old.—*APCC papers*—Packet No. 35, n. 52.

63. An anonymous note on Goalpara, in the *OEHFM*, Gauhati. The relevant information contained therein has been confirmed by O. K. Das. Abaruddin Munsî, Khagendranath Nath, Ripunjay Sinha etc. were among the leaders of this peasant organisation of Goalpara.

rights in land, the tenants often failed to secure any agricultural credit in times of need. They were subjected to various illegal cesses by their landlords under such pretences as *seva* (payment as a token of homage to landlords), *mati-pura* (payable on each marriage), *bahakharach* (landlord's touring expenses) and *puja kharach* (Puja expenses of the landlord).⁶⁴

A petition—signed by some 2,000 tenants of Kamrup—was addressed to the Governor-in-Council for legislative redress of their grievances. Public meetings were held in support of the tenants' demands. The local press, e.g.—the *Asamiya*, came out with articles and editorials to highlight the need for legislative action in this field. Even landlords were not totally opposed to the movement. This was because the tenants were agreeable to certain provisions, on the same lines as prescribed in the Goalpara Tenancy Act (I of 1929), to ensure speedy realisation of rent in arrear. In response to the agitation, the Council recommended tenancy legislation for all temporarily settled areas on 21 March 1933.⁶⁵

The most politicised peasant movement, however, developed in Sylhet, particularly among the Manipuri tenants of the Bhanubil area. The zamindari *mahal* of Bhanubil in the Pithimpasha estate of Maulvibazar was a cluster of nine villages, with a population of some 9,000 and arable lands amounting to about 1,500 acres. Between 1885 and 1922, the zamindari rent per *kear* (one-third acre) there had been gradually enhanced from ten annas to a rupee-and-a-half. Besides, an *abwub* and fines for failure to pay rent on the due date were also added. The measurement of land by a shorter pole in 1923 resulted in an increased rent burden that the peasants refused to accept.

In 1927 a notice was served, thereby enhancing the rent further to Rs. 2-8 annas per *kear*. The estate managed to obtain some decrees at that rate by 1931. While executing the decrees by force, the zamindars demolished hundreds of tenants' homes, seized their cattle and destroyed their granaries in the face of a no-rent campaign. Peasants, helped by a section of Congressmen, offered stiff resistance. Khirodechandra Deb, Purnendukishore Sengupta, Saralabala Deb and many peasant leaders and Congressmen,

64. Speech by R. K. Chaudhuri on 21 March, *ALCP* (1933). Vol. 13, pp. 732-3. Chaudhuri read out long extracts from the mass petition.

65. Chaudhuri's speech, *ibid*: the *Asamiya*, 25 *Agrahayana* (24 Nov. 1932) as well as 5, 12 and 23 Feb. 1933, cited in the same source; p. 743.

including women, were convicted to imprisonment in the Bhanubil case during the years 1931-34. Some like Baikunthanath Sarma, a leader of the Manipuri peasant community, were convicted for a second term in January 1934.⁶⁶

The fierce class struggle at Bhanubil, at a time when a workers' and peasants' party was in the process of consolidation in neighbouring Bengal, helped the spreading of nebulous socialist ideas in Sylhet. An association, reportedly styled "*Samyavadi Samiti*" (socialist association), was formed there in 1931, and its inaugural meeting was presided over by Jnananjan Neogi from Bengal in July. Resolutions were passed in that meeting to rouse the ryots against their landlords. Members of the association took up the cause of the Manipuri tenants of Bhanubil and tried to build up a tenants' movement in other places as well.⁶⁷

Not only British rule, but landlordism and capitalism also came under fire from the emergent leftist youth. Dwarikanath Goswami had to go to prison for a short term as a *satyagraha* volunteer in 1930. Rearrested, he was convicted by the High Court in 1932 to a long jail term, on charges of instigating youngmen of Sylhet to commit murder. After Goswami's arrest, Harendrachandra Chaudhury tried to induce the Manipuri tenants of the British-managed Dhemai Tea Estate not to pay rent to their landlord. According to police reports, he belonged "to the advanced socialist party".⁶⁸

The new wind was blowing into Sylhet through other windows as well. Muslim seamen, returning from various ports to their native villages in Sylhet, brought back with them stories about the Soviet

66. *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 1251; Scott to Dawson. Confidential 349 C, Silchar, 19 June 1934 in Confidential B, March 1935, Nos. 23-44. File No. 98-C of 1934 (AS); a note on the background of the dispute in 'J. Nehru's Assam Tour File', *AICC Files*—No. p. 4 (i)—1937 (NMML, N. Delhi).

R. N. Aditya, *Fight for Freedom in Sylhet* (Karimganj, 1964), pp. 14-15, suggests that Manipuri peasants involved in the struggle numbered more than 50,000. A British delegation came to Bhanubil for a first-hand report of the movement, and the atrocities committed on peasants were discussed in the House of Commons. Also see Ajay Bhattacharya, *Nankar Vidroha* Vol. 1, (In Bengali, Dacca, 1973), Vol. 1, pp. 67-73. He informs that Bankim Mukherjee, a Calcutta Communist, also visited Bhanubil for fact-finding.

67. Saadulla's reply to Nagendranath Chaudhury, a big zamindar, on 15 Sept. *ALCP* (1932), Vol. 12, pp. 937-8.

68. *Ibid*; Hezlett to Lawrie, Sylhet, 9 Jan. in Confidential A, March 1932. Nos. —21—III File No. 199 C of 1932 (AS); Confidential—A, June 1930, No. 31, File No.—102 C of 1930 (AS); Govt.'s reply to Chiratan Muchi on 16 Sept., *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 1255; Dutt, n. 10, p. 76.

Union and workers' struggles in distant lands. Aftab Ali, the secretary of the Seamen's Union of Calcutta, who himself belonged to Sylhet (Balaganj), addressed a couple of meetings in the district in October 1933. In these meetings, he talked of socialism and the urgency of the abolition of zamindaris. A peasants' and workers' conference was held at Bhartakhala village on 24 December 1932, with Abdul Karim in the chair. One principal organiser of the peasants' and ryots' associations in the district was Muhammed Mor-tuza Gabutaki.⁶⁹ It was the Muslim rich and middle peasants and *jotdars* who were at the back of this peasant and ryot (*Krishak Praja*) movement.

Local revolutionary youth groups were also exposed to the influence of socialist thought. They had participated in the non-violent Civil Disobedience, but having seen its futility, they moved towards the terrorist path. Finally, their equally frustrating experience and disillusionment with the terrorist path pushed many of them to the creed of Marxism-Leninism. This transition of Sylhet's Hindu middle class youth from terrorism to early socialist consciousness in the mid-thirties is worth examining.

Appeal of Revolutionary Terrorism

Several Bengal terrorist groups, particularly the *Yugantar* group, renewed their contacts in Sylhet around 1928. By 1930, the *Tarun Sangha* emerged as the most important revolutionary youth organisation. Openly functioning as a youth wing of the Congress to train its volunteers, the *Sangha* was also a camouflage for terrorist activists. The *Vidvasram*, with its several branches in the district, on the other hand, organised youth on the basis of non-violence and constructive activities. On 25 July 1931, the Surma Valley Youth Conference met at Maulvibazar. Presided over by Jnananjan Neogi, it called upon the youth to be inspired by the martyrs. Several local terrorist groups appear to have merged into the *Tarun Sangha* which was banned *inter alia* on 5 February 1932.⁷⁰

Altogether 182 pieces of fire-arms were reportedly stolen during the four years from 1930 to 1933. A series of terrorist actions started

69. Gunning to Chief Secy., Confidential A, Sept. 1934, No. 24 and 26, File No. 42-C (AS), *Shriihatta Pratibha*, n. 55, p. 11.

70. J. A. Dawson's note of 26 May 1934 in Confidential B, March 1935, Nos—23—44, File No. 98—C of 1934 (AS); Letter from Addl. Superintendent of Police, Sylhet to D. C., Sylhet, 6 June 1930 Cited in Confidential A—Dec. 1930 Nos. 27-36, File No. 138 C of 1930 (AS); Written testimony of Sibendranath Dam Roy, 79 Umpling, Shillong, 7 August 1972 (interviewed).

with the attempted mail robbery between Haraspur and Govindapur on 6 January 1931. However, the most daring cases were the Itakhola and the Tinsukia mail robberies. The latter robbery took place on 11 June 1934 when the Down Assam Mail was stopped near Tinsukia in the Brahmaputra Valley by a band of Surma Valley and East Bengal terrorists. A Government communique took note of the existence of a terrorist party in the Surma Valley. A large number of youngmen were arrested between 13 March 1933 and 12 June 1934. The trial of revolutionaries involved in three cases began in Sylhet before a special tribunal in July 1934. Ten revolutionaries were sentenced to transportation for life or long prison terms. Ajitkumar Chakravarty, Bipulananda Kar Chaudhury and Gopendranath Ray, were convicted to jail terms varying from six to seven years and deported to Andaman. Asit Bhattacharyya of the Itakhola Case was executed. As an emergency measure to suppress terrorism, the Assam Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1934, was enforced in Sylhet and Cachar with effect from 14 May. It was further amended in 1935 and 1936. Achintyakumar Bhattacharya was one of the seven detenus held under this Act as suspected terrorists. He was released in 1936.⁷¹

The death-defying revolutionary terrorists made a deep impression also in the Brahmaputra Valley. The execution of Bhagat Singh on 23 March 1931 was followed by a series of protest meetings and mourning processions in many districts of Assam. Though not to the same extent as in Sylhet, the youth of Dhubri also were in close contact with Bengali terrorists. Two Assamese youngmen of Gauhati—Rajen Kalita and Khargeswar Sharma—were arrested at Dhubri with arms and were imprisoned. Hiranyakumar Chakrabarty of Dhubri town was later detained under the Assam Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1934.⁷² Terrorist activities thriving during the years 1931-33 were, however, on the wane in Sylhet thereafter. So was the case with peasants' associations.

71. Saadulla's speech 19 March, *ALCP* (1934), Vol. 14, pp. 669-72; Aditya, n. 66, p. 9; *ALCP* (1935), Vol. 15, p. 167; *ALCP* (1939), Vol. 19, pp. 13 and 158; Interview with Achintyakumar Bhattacharya at Gauhati on 1 July 1973.

Many of the terrorists later became communists.

72. For reference to Chakravarty, *APCC Papers*: Gen. Secy's report, 1937 in file n. 5, Packet—6; for reference to Kalita (elder brother of Haren Kalita) and Sharma, written testimony of Haridas Deka, J. C. Das Road, Gauhati-1, 27 February 1974 (interviewed). Dutt, n. 10, p. 77.

The Spectre of Communism

In the wake of the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929-33), the district authorities were alerted and asked to report on the potential communist menace in their respective jurisdictions. The district magistrate of Sylhet wrote on 23 February 1934 to the Chief Secretary:

“The various Raiyats’ and Peasants’ Societies, whose activities in this district gave cause to a good deal of anxiety some two years ago, at the time of the revival of the Civil Disobedience Movement, suggested that communist agitators might be at the back of the movement. Possibly this suggestion was unjustifiable. But the connection between these societies and other similar societies in the district of Tippera, which were responsible for serious disturbances was established... The activities of these Peasants’ and Workers’ societies have of course considerably diminished since that time and have now apparently dwindled down to the holding of one or two conferences during the year in the various subdivisions. These bodies however offer communist agitators a convenient focus for the propagation of their principles...”

After obtaining reports from all the districts, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam concluded on March 10, 1934 that the province was heretofore free from communist propaganda. He had nothing to advise in particular for containing a menace that did not exist.⁷³

There was not much ground for his complacency. For by 1936, a group of Sylhet communists was formally organised in Calcutta, with a view to propagate communism in Sylhet. The Surma Valley Provincial Committee of the All-India *Kisan Sabha* was formed the same year.⁷⁴ Jagannath Bhattacharya, an Assamese student at Banaras, joined the Congress Socialist Party and a communist group functioning within it. He was the lone Assamese participant in the first All-India *Kisan Sabha* Conference held at Lucknow in 1936.⁷⁵ Communist propaganda through the Labour Party of Bengal reached Dhubri, the gateway of the Brahmaputra Valley, by 1936. Articles on revolutionary Russia and its ideology that appeared in the

73. Confidential A, Sept. 1934, Nos. 24 and 33. File No. 42-C (AS).

74. Bhattacharyya, n. 66, pp. 78 and 95.

75. Jagannath Bhattacharyya to Guha, Calcutta, 23 August 1974; also interviewed on 20 August 1974.

Assamese periodicals in the early thirties also made an impact on the student intelligentsia.

Working-class Struggles: 1927-36

In December 1927, a two-member delegation of the British Trade Union Congress was assisted by local Congressmen to get first-hand knowledge of the deplorable working conditions in Assam tea gardens. Later, the AITUC sent one Sahu to organise tea garden labour in Assam. He was arrested and given a month's imprisonment.⁷⁶ However, the stoppage of work as a means to better working conditions came into prominence in 1926-27 when tea garden workers gained concessions through lightning strikes. A series of such strikes took place in the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Nowgong. Cases of collision were more numerous next year when plantation labour turned violent against the management at least in seven cases. In 1928-29, violence had to be prevented by the Assam police on five or six such occasions. A 17-day strike in the Dibru-Sadiya Railways in 1928 involved about 430 working men and ended in a wage increase for them. In 1929, about 800 men in the Digboi oil fields struck work on Sundays and won their demand for compensatory payment for extra work. In the same year there were short-lived strikes in both the Valleys in a number of tea gardens such as Paloi, Silcooria, Allenpur, Salona-Barghat, Messa, Tarajuli etc., involving no less than 2,500 workers.⁷⁷

Unlike the Non-cooperation movement of 1921, the political upheaval of the thirties failed to rouse the workers of Assam into action. Not that they did not suffer from the economic depression. But their resentment took the usual path of sporadic and self-contained strikes

76. In course of his judgement, the trying magistrate, Benudhar Rajkhowa, commented : "A criminal trespass into the coolie line of a tea garden in circumstances like those which are found in this case requires, in my opinion, for obvious reasons an exemplary punishment".—Quoted by Hemchandra Baruah in "banuvar durdasha", *Tinidunia Asamiya* (1930) and reproduced in S. Sharma, ed., *Tyagabir Hemchandra Barua Smritigrantha* (Gauhati, 1971) pp. 282-92.
77. Royal Commission on Labour in India, *Written Evidence, Vol. 6—Part I Assam and the Doars* (London, 1930), pp. 24-25; *Annual Reports on the Immigrant Labour*, separately for each valley for the year ending 30th June 1929; the same for 1928, cited in D. Chamanlall, *Coolie: the Story of Labour and Capital in India*, Vol. 2 (Lahore, 1932), p. 32; *India in 1928-29 : A Report Preferred for Presentation to Parliament* .. (Home Dept., Calcutta, 1929), p. 307. Also see A. A. Parell, M. P. and J. Hollsworth, *Report on Labour Conditions in India* (Trade Union Congress General Council London, 1928), pp. 35-36.

on economic demands. There were no meeting-points between these economic struggles and the contemporaneous political movement. The number of tea gardens and their workers involved in strikes on record were as follows:

PLANTATION WORKERS' STRIKES : 1930-36

Year	Gardens Involved	Workers Involved	Man-days Lost
1930	3	1,900	—
1931	12	3,200	—
1932	8	3,200	—
1933	11	5,500	—
1934-35	8	4,071	11,850
1935-36	13	7,016	20,360

Source: (Reply of A. K. Das to A. K. Chanda on 1 March, *ALAP* (1938), pp. 583-6; Labour Investigation Committee, *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India* (Delhi, 1946), p.72.

The above summary figures suggest that plantation workers' strikes were not correlated with the rise and ebb of the Civil Disobedience Movement. They were all along clearly ebullient, although they had neither a trade union organisation of their own nor any contact with politics outside.

The only instance of a politicised labour struggle was provided by the Dhubri Match Factory workers. The Match Factory, owned by Swedish capital, started production in 1925 with about 500 workers. In 1928 its workers struck work for about a week, but failed to achieve anything. Retrenchment and wage-cuts went on unrestrained. In 1935-36 all the 350 workers of the factory were again on a 57-day strike, in protest against retrenchment. Unionised and led by Bipinchandra Chakrabarty, a veteran trade unionist from Bengal, the workers won this time almost all their demands. The strike was inspired by the Labour Party of Bengal, of which Chakrabarty was a member. Resolutions passed at the Dhubri Labourers' Conference under his guidance clearly reflected the influence of the new

communist ideology. On 14 December 1936, the Dhubri Match Factory workers were again on a strike and faced an unusually prolonged lock-out. This episode will be discussed in the next chapter.⁷⁸

FOURTH REFORMED COUNCIL WITHOUT SWARAJISTS

The Carrot and the Councillors

The Council, by its resolution of 12 March 1930, welcomed the Governor-General's announcement on the proposed RTC and his declaration regarding the Dominion Status. Kumar Gopikaraman Roy, a new member who held allegiance to the All-India Landholders' Association, characterised the proposed RTC rather as a gift "that we should welcome with gratefulness".⁷⁹ After the Swarajists' exit, several cut motions in March fell through. The Council voted, 27 to 12, to defeat R. K. Choudhuri's motion recommending the withdrawal of the Cunningham Circular. A token cut motion affecting the demand for supplementary grants to the police was also defeated.⁸⁰ Friends of the Congress nevertheless managed to expose the Government's repressive policy through animated interpellation and critical speeches in September.

Brindabanchandra Goswami, a Hindu Mahasabhaite from Nowgong, tabled a motion on 15 September expressing dissatisfaction with the Simon Commission's recommendations and suggesting their substantial modification. He denounced not only separate electorates but also the provisions, permitting the induction of non-elected members into the provincial cabinets.⁸¹

Munawwar Ali's amendment to this motion was practically a substantive motion by itself. He moved:

"... in the opinion of this Council the report of the Simon Commission is unacceptable and that this council is of opinion that Dominion Status with autonomous provinces forming into a federation, with full responsibility of the provincial as well as of

78. Confidential D. O. No. 481-C, Godfrey to Gunning, Goalpara, 28 Nov. 1936 (Police Dept. Special Branch, Govt. of Assam, Shillong); Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's speech on 4 August *ALAP* (1937), pp. 188-90; Reply of A. K. Das to A. K. Chanda, 1 March, *ALAP* (1938), pp. 583-6.

79. *ALCP* (1930), Vol. 10, pp. 49-52.

80. Debate on Cunningham Circular, 10 Sept. *ibid.*, pp. 735-78.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 1051-4.

the central Governments to their respective legislatures, be immediately established in India with adequate safeguards of the interests of the Muslim and other minority communities".

Munawwar Ali was dissatisfied because nowhere did the Commission commit itself to the goal of Dominion Status. Besides, the control of the Indian Army by the Governor-General and the provision of a separate budget for it would mean a strong centre that would jeopardise provincial autonomy. He regretted his being a member of the committee that had been set up to assist the Commission. It was his resolution that was finally carried without a division, after he had assured the House of his opposition to both secession from the Empire and repudiation of national debt.⁸²

The critical mood of the House changed soon after the Gandhi-Irwin meeting of 5 March 1931. On 14 March, two resolutions were adopted, *nem con*. One of these welcomed the British Prime Minister's policy regarding India's constitutional development, which was declared in his concluding speech at the first RTC. The resolution noted that the principles enunciated "should afford a satisfactory basis for further discussion" and eventually provide India with a constitution, acceptable to all sections of the community. Equally optimistic, Munawwar Ali's resolution appreciated not only the steps taken by the Government of India but also those by the Congress Working Committee towards creating a favourable atmosphere. It further recorded the Council's gratefulness to Lord Irwin and Mahatma Gandhi "for the untiring zeal and energy and far-sighted statesmanship displayed by them in bringing about the aforesaid happy state of things".⁸³

When the White Paper of 18 March 1933 came up before the Council, Saadulla, Leader of the House, left the entire discussion to non-official members. However, R. K. Chaudhuri moved an adjournment till April, since the House of Commons was going to discuss the White Paper on 28 March. Others joined him in not castigating the proposed reforms until the matter was talked out.⁸⁴

On 9 March 1935, Chaudhuri again opposed the consideration of both the Joint Parliamentary Committee's Report and the Government of India Bill on the ground that no fruitful discussion on them could be held at that stage. Somewhat surprised at this

82. Ibid, 1059-61 and 1091-2.

83. *ALCP* (1931), Vol. 11, pp. 255-76.

84. Debate on White Paper, 23 March, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 815-60.

On 6 March 1933, the Council voted, 26 to 7, to institute a seven-member committee for reviewing the Government's opium policy in the light of the conclusions of a global enquiry made by the League of Nations. R. K. Chaudhuri and Sanatkumar Das (Cachar) said that they would welcome a committee to prohibit rather than to preserve opium. The committee was formed on 7 March with Nichols-Roy as its chairman. Its findings were revealing. Immediately prior to the implementation of 10 per cent annual cut, i.e., on 31 March 1928, there were altogether 85,976 registered opium consumers. Their number decreased to 69,605 at the end of 1932-33, and half of them were aged above 50 years. Their per capita consumption of opium meanwhile decreased from 2.2 tolas to only 1.36 tolas a month. The retail consumer price was Rs. 160/- per *seer* in 1932-33. The economics of opium, as a state monopoly, worked out as follows in the same year:⁹⁴

ECONOMICS OF OPIUM MONOPOLY : 1932-33

Gross Provincial Opium Revenue	Rs. 21,20,944 (100)
Less Price Paid-out to Ghazipur Factory	Rs. 2,74,686 (13)
Less Maintenance Cost of Excise Staff	Rs. 1,08,118 (5)
Net Provincial Opium Revenue	Rs. 17,38,140 (82)

Grazing Fees and the Council

Revised grazing rules were enforced on 1 July 1926. Their avowed intention was to confine the levy strictly to professional graziers and traders in cattle and milk. Yet unreconciled, the Reformed Council refused supplies under the head of commissions payable to collectors of the grazing dues.⁹⁵ The Government decided thereafter to appoint a small committee to examine the working of the new grazing rules and to advise further action, if necessary, to limit the fee collection to the intended classes of people alone. N.C. Bardaloi

94. Nichols-Roy Committee pp. 10-16, 20 and 40; *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 49-56 and 81.

95. Govt. of Assam Resolution of 24 April 1925 cited by S. Barua, 12 March, *ALCP* (1934), Vol. 14, p. 345; Assam Government's resolution on 7 May 1927 cited in Revenue Dept.; Revenue A, June 1928, No. 6, (AS). Half the cut was restored by the Governor by way of certification, to meet the committed expenditure on account of the collections of 1926-27.

refused to serve on it since a nominated committee headed by a divisional commissioner did not inspire his confidence. Finally, the committee was formed on 7 May 1927 with three members—Sadananda Dowerah, Keramat Ali and the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division. The Committee recommended a liberal application of the rules so as to bring down the total number of assessee listed in 1926-27.⁹⁶

Once more the grazing fees became a target of attack in the legislature in March 1934. Allegations that almost all the cattle-owning Assamese peasants had been assessed, remained unsubstantiated and were not acceptable even to R. K. Chaudhuri. Nevertheless the grazing fees continued to be unpopular. In disputed cases, the rules did not permit an assessee to move a civil court for relief. Besides, these rules were often differently interpreted in different districts, e.g., more rigorously in Kamrup than in Nowgong. As a result, associations of professional graziers appeared on the scene to carry on the agitation. On 12 March the Council's censure was recorded through a cut motion, carried by 19 to 17 votes.⁹⁷ The grazing rules, were again revised, and these were implemented in September 1934. On 1 March 1935, M. Gohain moved a cut on the land revenue demand to protest against the harassment of peasants, at the time of assessing grazing fees. But this time the Council voted, 22 to 16, to reject the motion.⁹⁸ Grazing fees ceased to be a major economic grievance since then.

Legislation on Land Revenue Settlement

Regulations, under which the land revenue rates in Assam were revised and claimed from time to time, had no legislative sanction. The Joint Parliamentary Committee noted this fact in 1919 and underlined the need for statutory land legislation. Since then there was persistent agitation in Assam against arbitrary land revenue settlement operations. The first Reformed Council, though otherwise docile, refused necessary grants when the executive Government undertook resettlement operations in 1923 to replace the last settlement of 1905-12. Funds for continued resettlement operations were,

96. 9-10 Sept., *ALCP* (1925), Vol. 5, pp. 1456-66 and 1491-1502 and 17 Sept., *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7—part 2, p. 1689; Revenue Dept. Revenue A, June 1928, Nos. 4, 6 and 15, (AS).
97. 12 March, *ALCP* (1934), Vol. 14, pp. 345-51. In his speech, S. Barua demanded reduction in the rate of fees.
98. *ALCP* (1935), Vol. 15, pp. 296-8 and 308.

however, restored under the Governor's certificate. A resolution for the recasting of the Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886, within the frame of legislative sanction, and for postponing the resettlement operations until then, was carried in an amended form on 15 August 1925. But no such postponement followed.⁹⁹

Then came the Assam Settlement Bill, 1925, to validate the resettlement operations. The Select Committee on it felt that land revenue rates, calculated at 20 per cent of the gross produce, was too great a burden on the agriculturists and, therefore, should be fixed at 10 per cent. The official attempt to recommit the bill having failed on 25 February 1926, the Government allowed it to lapse, rather than remodel it in the recommended form. The resettlement operations went on as before under the executive authority. In the same year, thousands of peasants assembled at Golaghat to greet the visiting Governor with protests against the enhanced reassessment of land revenue rates in that subdivision.¹⁰⁰

The legislature, too, sharply reacted to the enhancement of land revenue rates in 1927 and 1928. For example, it voted, 31 to 12, to adjourn the House in order to discuss the arbitrary reassessment in Kamrup, soon after the relevant Resolutions of the Governor-in-Council were published on 16 February 1927. It refused grants for the continued resettlement operations.¹⁰¹ In September 1928, R. K. Chaudhuri's motion to stay further collection of land revenue at the newly reassessed rates, until appropriate legislation on the subject, was adopted by the House. Yet another motion for realisation of land revenue at old rates was again adopted in September 1929.¹⁰² But in no case did the Government take any action to implement these resolutions.

99. Kamakhyaram Baruah's speech, 28 March *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 228; Governor's address, 13 July, *ALCP* (1925), Vol. 5, p. 869; Kuladhar Chaliha's speech, 11 Sept., *ALCP* (1929), Vol. 9, p. 1112; Speech, 19 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, p. 875.

The 1925 resolution was moved by Nilmoni Phukan.

100. *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 875-6; Faiznur Ali's minute of dissent in the Select Committee Report on the Assam Settlement Bill, 1925 and his speech of 26 Feb. 1926, cited by Nilambar Datta, 12 Sept., *ALCP* (1930), Vol. 10, p. 872; M. Gohain's speech, 11 Sept., *ALCP* (1929), Vol. 9, p. 1100. Some members even argued that the land revenue fixed at 10 per cent of the gross produce would fairly approximate one-third of the net produce, which had country-wide acceptance as a norm.

101. *Assam Gazette*, 16 Feb. 1927, pp. 257-69; 2 March, *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7, p. 291; R. K. Chaudhuri's speech, 11 Sept., *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, pp. 875-6.

102. Sarveswar Barua's speech, 10 Sept., *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 9, pp. 1067-8; 11 Sept., *ibid.*, p. 1116.

The Assam Settlement Bill, 1925, was revived in the form of the Assam Land Revenue Reassessment Bill, 1930, and it was discussed in the Council on 11 September 1930. As a concession to popular demand, the bill now fixed the land revenue ceiling for an assessment group at $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the gross produce. This new formula was claimed to have resulted from an informal compromise reached between the Government and all-party representatives on 16 March 1929. On 12 September an amendment was moved to fix the ceiling of the total revenue demand on an assessment group at one-third of its net produce. Since the actual production cost was indeterminate because of non-monetised elements therein, the Government argued that the net produce was not a practicable concept. With 22 votes on each side, for and against, the amendment was rejected by the casting vote from the chair. However, the Council voted, 22 to 21, to accept another amendment by which the revenue demand on an assessment group was limited to 10 per cent of the value of its gross produce. On 13 September, the amended bill was passed without a division. But the Governor returned the bill for reconsideration.¹⁰³

On 17 March 1931, the House again refused to reconsider its earlier decision. The Government, too, remained adamant. After years of a stalemate, when practically the same bill was moved in 1935 by a private member, good sense at last prevailed upon it. It gave way and even co-operated with the House to circumvent certain procedural difficulties. The long-disputed bill was thus passed into an Act in 1936.¹⁰⁴

The hard-pressed peasants had been clamouring all these years for a reduction in land revenue rates, and their clamour was echoed in the Council repeatedly since 1928. In March, and again in October 1931, R. K. Chaudhuri moved a resolution recommending the formation of district-wise standing committees to enquire into ryots' conditions and specify the quantum of relief (in the form of land revenue remissions) for the slump years. On both occasions, his motion was rejected. Arrears in land revenue meanwhile piled up because

103. *ALCP* (1930), Vol. 10, pp. 813, 872-87 and 985-6; Governor's message to March session, *ALCP* (1931), Vol. 11, pp. 33-34. Both the amendments were moved by Nilambar Datta, a planter who was opposed to Congress.

104. 17 March, *ALCP* (1931), Vol. 11, pp. 385-97; *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 16, pp. 155-62 and 1048-50. The Council had already passed the Assam Land Revenue Regulations Bill in 1933, thus for the first time providing a statutory basis for land legislation.

12½ per cent on secured loans and 18½ per cent on unsecured loans. In no case was the accumulated burden of interest charges to exceed the principal sum. In 1936 the Assam Debt Conciliation Act followed.¹¹³ Several debt conciliation boards were established to give relief to debtors. These measures satisfied the conscience of the legislators, but not the real needs of the indebted people.

THE LINE THAT DIVIDED : 1921-36

Seeds of Conflict

Referring to the prevailing situation in the province, an Assamese member reminded the Council in 1936 that :

“... the line of division in Assam politics is primarily not between Hindu and Muhammedan or on caste lines, but between the inhabitants of the Assam Valley and those of the Surma Valley”
[—*Report of the Delimitation Committee*, p.89].

Yet another member had said in July 1924 that the two Valleys were being forced to run a “three-legged race in which no progress whatever is possible”.¹¹⁴ Not that there was no political rivalry in terms of Hindu-Muslim communalism. But its open manifestation was much subdued in Assam as compared to Bengal and other provinces. This was because each community was again sharply divided, linguistically and Valley-wise. Even long before the birth of the Muslim League in Assam, men like Saadulla and local *anjumans* had persistently stood for the principle of separate Muslim electorates. But this did not create any deadlock or riots. In fact, the local authorities in Sibsagar provided for communal representation as early as 1883, apparently without having provoked any local protest.¹¹⁵

The balance of power between the two Valleys was maintained on an even keel through a parity formula in the allocation of public

113. Governor's address, 31 Oct., *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 16, pp. 1658-9.

114. Sarveswar Barua's speech, 16 March, *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 16, p. 329 and B. N. Chaudhry's speech, *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, p. 568.

115. V. Venkata Rao, *A Hundred Years of Local Self Government in Assam*. (2nd edn., Gauhati, 1965), pp. 206-7.

Saadulla had demanded communal representation for Muslims also in local bodies in 1913 and 1914—10 April *ALCP* (1913), p. 80 and 2 April 1914, p. 84. He reiterated the same view in the Council in 1917 when he said: “Our voice too from the Assam Valley would not have been heard in this Council but for the principle of communal representation”. 25 April *ALCP* (1917), p. 128.

expenditure and Government jobs. What was of concern to the people therefore was the maldistribution of power and resources, not so much between the two Valleys as between the two major linguistic groups—the Assamese and the Bengalis. The Bengalis had already a much larger share in the Government jobs than what their numerical strength in the province justified. On the census counts, those who returned Bengali as their mother tongue far out-numbered the Assamese-speaking population. The former's percentage in the population-mix of the province tended to increase from census to census, due to the influx of immigrants. This also alarmed a major section of the Assamese. They insisted that the Assam Government should allow only those immigrants who held domicile certificates to compete for local Government jobs, scholarships and contracts. Such certificates were, however, a rare commodity.¹¹⁶

Under the circumstances, the 'Valley jealousy' which was formerly limited to job-seeking middle classes alone, was slowly being percolated and transformed into a cult of aggressive and defensive linguistic nationalism. Most of the Goalpara zamindars identified themselves with Bengali culture and launched a movement for the transfer of Goalpara to Bengal after World War I. Their agitation persisted throughout the twenties and early thirties.¹¹⁷ It was then that the demand for containment of further influx of East Bengal Muslim immigrants into Goalpara, and the rest of the Brahmaputra Valley, was increasingly raised as a political issue. If the immigration continued unrestrained, would not the Assamese be turned into a linguistic minority in their own homeland—the Brahmaputra Valley? This was the question which plagued the minds of not only its urban middle classes, but also the peasant masses. It was in this

116. Speech by J. A. Dawson, 16 March, *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 16, pp. 349-50. In 1935, for example, only 64 domicile certificates were issued by district magistrates of Assam.

117. The zamindars of Goalpara district petitioned to Lord Chelmsford and, later in July 1921, addressed the Governor for its transfer to Bengal. Raja Prabhachandra Barua of Gaunpur brought out a pamphlet to publicise the demand. The Bengali-Assamese feelings were tense in Goalpara subdivision at the time of 1926 elections. The Swaraj party candidate, though a bona fide Assamese, was rejected by his electorate there because a book, written and published by him in Bengali, had raised doubts about his linguistic affiliation. Mukundanarayan Barua, a Goalpara zamindar, suggested in 1929 to the Simon Commission that, "the law, language and the social customs of the area concerned" justified the transfer of permanently-settled parts of Goalpara to Bengal. —Quote from Barua's note of dissent in the *Smiles Committee Report*, n. 86, p. 11; N. C. Bardoloi's speech, 21 July, *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7, p. 980; B. Ghosh's speech, 7 Jan., *ALCP* (1926), Vol. 6, pp. 104-5; *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 575-6.

context that public attention was focussed on the 'Line system' which the officials had evolved in response to the situations since 1920.

Genesis of the Line System

Immigration was no doubt an welcome phenomenon for labour-short, land-abundant Assam from the economic point of view. Landless immigrants from over-populated East Bengal—of them some 85 per cent were Muslims—found land in Assam's water-logged, jungle-infested, riverine belt. Used to an amphibious mode of living and industrious, these immigrants came by rail, steamers and boats up the Brahmaputra to reclaim these malarial areas. All that they wanted was land. From their riverine base, they further pressed themselves forward in all directions in search of more of living space in the areas held by the autochthones. It was then that an open clash of interests began to take place.

Administrative measures had to be devised to contain the conflict. The Line system—an idea that was first mooted in 1916 and adopted in 1920—was such a device. Under this system, a line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas, specified for their exclusive settlement. The number of settlers, including children born after their arrival, increased from an estimated three lacs in 1921 to over half a million in 1931.¹¹⁸ Colonists were settling on Government waste lands by families, and not singly. They were better cultivators and, hence, could offer higher and lucrative land prices to induce Assamese peasants to sell out portions of their holdings. Local Marwari and even Assamese moneylenders financed the immigrants so that the latter could reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, *ahu* rice, pulses and vegetables.¹¹⁹

The Assamese public opinion began increasingly to clamour against the failure of the Line system. Pressed by Bishnu Bora—a *nauzadar* member of the Council—the Government admitted on 3 August

118. Census of India, 1951, Vol. 12, Part II A, pp. 72-73; *Report of the Line System Committee*, Vol. 1 (Shillong, 1938), pp. 1-4.

119. Jagannath Bujar-Barua told the Assam Banking Enquiry Committee that immigration had led to all-round prosperity in Barpeta area. Many Assamese farmers had turned into land speculators. They sold off their lands to immigrants at a good price; then they cleared new plots (*pam*) on waste lands and sold them again. The immigrants were financed by their own headmen (*matbar*) as well as by Marwari and Assamese (Barpetia) moneylenders. Even the *hati* (indigenous co-operative bank) funds of Barpetia were involved in this financing, to a small extent. *Assam Banking Enquiry Committee Report*, 1929-30, Vol. 2, pp. 508-17.

1923 that there was continuous immigration into Nowgong. But it also asserted that wastelands in Nowgong were plentifully available both for immigrant and local people. Bora had to concede that the policy of wasteland settlement in racially segregated blocks in Nowgong during the years 1920-24 was not altogether unsatisfactory. Villages on wastelands grants were classified into three categories—(i) those made available exclusively to immigrants, (ii) those made available exclusively to local people and (iii) those available to both. No land settlement could be made with an immigrant family beyond a ceiling of 16 *bighas*. Sub-letting of lands to immigrants and employing them as agricultural labour by local people in Assamese lines were also prohibited. A large number of complaints nonetheless poured into the district magistrate's office about encroachments on lands ear-marked for the local Assamese people. The pencil-drawn alignments of the line on maps were often tampered by the corrupt revenue staff. Towards the end of 1924, the local administration was found to be increasingly indulgent of such encroachments and corrupt practices.¹²⁰

The Assamese public demanded a rigid policy. Mahadev Sharma moved a resolution on 23 July 1927 with a view to prevent, or at least restrict, the settlement of wastelands with immigrants from other provinces and from foreign countries, including the British planters. It recommended the appointment of a committee to examine, district by district, the actual position regarding (a) the availability of wastelands, (b) the desirability of reserving adequate area for future development and (c) the implications of an immigration policy in terms of its impact on the requirements of grazing, fuel and forest reserves. B. K. Das spoke in favour of protecting the interests of the children of the soil. N. C. Bardaloi was one "who would not restrict immigration, so far as can be helped". He admitted that Sharma's motion was not happily-worded. Nonetheless he, too, emphasised the desirability of reserving adequate areas of wastelands in each district for future development.¹²¹

Sharply divided on a Hindu and non-Hindu basis on Sharma's resolution, the House voted, 24 to 18, to reject it. The Government was not prepared to commit itself to any kind of restrictive

120. Reply to Bishnu Bora, 13 August, *ALCP* (1923), Vol. 3, p. 521; Bishnu Bora's speech on 23 July, *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7—part 2, pp. 1089-91.

121. 23 July, *ALCP* (1927), Vol. 7—Part 2, pp. 1084, 1091-3 and 1103.

legislation, but nonetheless agreed to call an all-party conference to thrash out the issue.¹²²

Colonisation Schemes

A conference of district officers, held at Shillong in 1928, decided that the number of 'lines' should be reduced, simplified and straightened as far as possible with the objective of allocating considerable blocks of land community-wise. In September 1928, an all-party committee, with A. W. Botham as the chairman, conferred on this issue. The official note that was circulated advocated a positive colonisation policy, mainly on revenue considerations. It argued that an administrative control over the process of natural migration, so necessary for a planned settlement, was in any case preferable to haphazard squatting. The committee consisted of four European and five Indian members, including Saadulla and N. C. Bardaloi.¹²³

Bardaloi advocated for compact colonisation areas outside which immigrants should not be allowed to settle afresh. He also suggested that enough land be left vacant to accommodate the future progeny of the Assamese people. All these points were acceptable to the Government, although opinions varied as to the quantum of wastelands actually available in the Brahmaputra Valley.¹²⁴ This was how the colonisation schemes came into existence.

On 3 April 1928 the Council was told that the official policy of restricting and regulating land settlement with immigrants, by means of "lines within villages" or of "exclusion from whole *mauzas* or villages", had been adopted mainly to protect the Assamese and aboriginal inhabitants—but partly also to avoid breaches of peace. The Government was aware that a system of racial segregation was being practised thereby. Nevertheless, it found it desirable to settle wastelands—in the earlier stages at least—"in blocks with persons of the same community and that land should remain for some time on annual basis in order to control transfers".¹²⁵

The colonisation policy, though initiated by British officials, derived its legitimacy thus from the deliberations of an all-party

122. Ibid, pp. 1104-5.

123. Rhode's speech, 16 March, *ALCP* (1931), Vol. 11, p. 307. *Report of the Line System Committee* (Shillong, 1938), Vol. 1, p. 4.

124. Cited in R. K. Chaudhuri's speech, 24 Feb., *ALAP* (1938), pp. 410-2.

125. *ALCP* (1928), Vol. 8, p. 247. In 1924, a colonisation officer was functioning in Nowgong district to look after immigrants' settlement.—*ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 1189-90 and 1245-6.

conference and had initially the approval of both Saadulla and N. C. Bardaloi. The first Colonisation Scheme, thereafter started in Nowgong in 1928, was successively followed by one each in Barpeta and Mangaldai subdivisions. Under all these schemes, a small family was to be given about 20 *bighas* of land on payment of a premium. The areas allotted under the Nowgong Scheme to 1,619 Muslim and 441 Hindu immigrant families amounted in all to 47,636 acres till March 1933.¹²⁶

AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS : 1935-36

District	Net Area Sown (Acres)	With percentage to total land area in bracket	Cultivable wastelands (Acres)
Kamrup	9,83,260	(35)	4,19,050
Nowgong	4,99,689	(15)	14,38,790
Darrang	5,44,231	(25)	7,18,890
Sibsagar	7,54,856	(22)	14,82,573
Lakhimpur	5,03,442	(16)	14,86,599
Assam Proper	32,85,478		55,45,902

Source: *Official data as cited by Munawwar Ali, 14 August, ALAP (1937), p. 711.*

Note: The total area of wastelands shown as cultivable was somewhat over-estimated. For in 1924, the proportion of the settled to total area, exclusive of reserve forests, was officially stated to be 21.75 per cent in Nowgong, 41.12 per cent in Kamrup and 44.86 per cent in Darrang. In Goalpara, it was nearly 100 per cent—Reply to Nilmoni Phukan, 25 Sept., *ALCP* (1924), Vol. 4, pp. 45-46.

During the six years preceding 1936, as many as 59 grazing, forest and village reserves had been thrown open in Nowgong under the

126. *ALCP* (1931), Vol. 11, p. 307; Reply to B. C. Goswami, 24 March, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 888.

127. 29 Sept., *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 6, p. 1446; Official data cited in R. K. Chaudhuri's speech in August, *ALAP* (1937), p. 714.

(Association for conservation of the Assamese) in 1926 to propagate the Assamese cause. Nilmoni Phukan, who had thrice failed to get himself elected to the Council since 1923, soon joined him in the chorus. The Congress tried to steer a middle course because of its all-India character. But it was pressurised from below to take a chauvinistic line on such issues as land, jobs and the medium of instruction in schools. The publication of the 1931 Census Report aggravated this fear complex. In presenting the Census results, C. S. Mullan—an irresponsible European civil servant—instigated a hate campaign against the immigrants. He wrote that during the years 1921-31, the immigrant army

“...has almost completed the *conquest* of Nowgong. The Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup has also fallen to their *attack* and Darrang is being *invaded*. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely, but the few thousand Mymensinghians in North Lakhimpur are an *outpost* which may, during the next decade, prove to be a valuable basis of *major operations*. Wheresoever the carcass, there the *vultures* be gathered together. Where there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghians”. (Emphasis ours).—1931 *Census Report*, p.51.

Mullan tried to peer into the future and he even mischievously tried to forecast the future course of this “invasion”. He prophesied that Sibsagar would ultimately remain the only district where an Assamese race would find a home of its own.¹³¹ The motivation behind such irresponsible and unfounded utterings was clear. He wanted the Assamese and the immigrants to be set against each other.

So mischievous and blatantly fallacious was Mullan’s observation that even the Governor in his address to the Council on 6 March 1933 thought it expedient to quote the same 1931 Census Report to point out that

“... inspite of the large increase in the population of Assam at every Census since 1901, the percentage of speakers of Assamese to the total population has remained very steady. It is clear from

131. Citation in *Census of India, 1951, Vol. 12, part 1-A Report* (Shillong, 1954), p. 73.

the figures of increase in the speakers of Assamese at this Census that the language is at present in no danger of supersession".¹³²

Time has held out now that the Governor was right and Mullan was wrong. However, it was the latter's false prophecy of 1931 that provided a rationale to chauvinism which was to plague Assam for many years to come. An article on the gloomy future of the Assamese nationality was published in 1937 by Jnananath Bora, a leading intellectual of the province, in *Dainik Batori* (Jorhat), the mouth-piece of the *Samrakshini* movement. Bora argued that unless Sylhet was separated, unless Assamese was declared the only medium of instruction in schools and unless the influx of settlers was stopped, it would be difficult for the Assamese to survive as a nationality.¹³³ Bora was only echoing a cry raised on the floor of the Council the previous year—"... and now, sir, can this be reward from God that the Assamese people should confine themselves to Sibsagar alone.... We will not allow this to be"¹³⁴

A major section of the Assamese public was noticeably agitated over the outsider issue. In all the Government schools of the Brahmaputra Valley, attended by both Bengali and Assamese pupils in sizable numbers, there used to be a time-old arrangement not only for teaching their respective mother tongues, but also for imparting lessons through both the media upto class VI and through the medium of English thereafter. Following the Calcutta University's decision to adopt mother-tongues of pupils as media of instructions in place of English in classes VII-X at the high school stage, the Assam Government decided in favour of unilingual schools. It encouraged, accordingly, the setting-up of new aided schools exclusively for Bengali children since 1935. Bengali-medium sections were no longer provided in the Government schools of the Brahmaputra Valley, except at Dhubri for another few years. Thus, a wedge was driven

132. Governor's address, *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, p. 5.

133. In the bundle of *APCC Papers*—Packet No. 6: File 4, the present author came across a letter by Munin Barkataki, appealing to Congress to remodel its stand in the light of Bora's article. The reference was obviously to the article, "Assam desharu Congress", *Dainik Batori*, 24 Oct., Sunday, 1937. It is interesting to note that the *Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha*, Gauhati, offered to issue non-official domicile certificates signed by its general secretary to boost the process of Assamisation.—Speech by J. A. Dawson, 16 March, *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 16, pp. 349-50. Dawson made fun of this attempt.

134. J. Gohain's speech, 14 March, *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 16, p. 297.

between the Assamese and the Bengali communities through segregated schools.¹³⁵

The Maulana of Bhasani

With the passage of the Money-lenders' Act of 1934, the prospect of further tenancy legislation and extended powers of the legislature under the coming reforms, the influential Bengali Hindu urban middle classes became increasingly panicky about their future status in the local power-structure.¹³⁶ Also, much concerned as they were about their cultural rights, they did not sit idle under the circumstances. In collaboration with some Marwaris, they founded the Assam Domiciled and Settlers' Association in 1935 for the protection of their own interests and to forge alliance, if possible, with Bengali Muslim settlers on all common issues. But the latter did not look forward to Assamese Muslim or Bengali Hindu politicians for leading them out of the wilderness. A new and autonomous leadership emerged slowly and silently within the community itself in Goalpara, after Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan had immigrated there in the year 1928.¹³⁷

The Maulana was born in a peasant family at a village near Sirajganj in the district of Pabna in East Bengal. After a formal schooling at a madrasa, he taught for some time as a primary teacher in the village of Kagmari in neighbouring Tangail. After his first political experience as a Khilafatist and Non-cooperator, he realised that

135. For details on the medium of instruction prior to the change, see reply to Nichols-Roy, 15 Sept., *ALCP* (1933), Vol. 13, pp. 1190-4.

Following the establishment of a Government-aided Bengali High School in 1935 at Gauhati, R. K. Chaudhuri said: "...the seed of the poisonous tree which will ever disunite the Bengalees and Assamese was sown with their blessings".—14 March, *ALCP* (1936), Vol. 6, p. 262.

To forestall the segregationist move, local Congress leaders like G. N. Bardoloi sought cooperation of the so-called leaders of the Bengali community in running mixed schools under private managements. But the latter were too ready to play into the hands of the administration.—Information from Brajamohan Lahiri, a former resident of Gauhati, in course of an interview at Calcutta on 7 March 1974.

136. While presiding over the first conference of the Assam Domiciled Peoples' and Settlers' Association held at Dhubri on 2 June 1935, Rai Bahadur Kalicharan Sen cited the Assam Tenancy Bill, the Assam Municipal (Amendment) Act and the Moneylenders' Act, 1934 as sources of great and grave danger to the landowning settlers and factory-owners of his community. The second conference held at Tezpur in December 1935 unanimously passed a resolution expressing feelings of "loyalty to the person and throne of His Majesty the King Emperor".—*Assam Citizens Association* (comp. by Dhubri Head Office, Gauhati 1940), pp. 49 and 52. Needless to mention that this reactionary platform failed to attract the Bengali masses or even the middle-class Bengali youth.

137. Mohammad Waliullah, *Yuga-Bichitra* (In Bengali, Dacca, 1967), p. 421.

Bengal's Muslim peasantry would have to continue their struggle against the zamindars and money-lenders, who were mostly Hindus. He did not hesitate to exploit religious sentiments to organise and unite the province's oppressed Muslim peasants.¹³⁸ One of the side issues he took up, for example, was the restoration of a forgotten and dilapidated mosque within the premises of the zamindar of Santosh in Tangail.¹³⁹

In December 1932 Bhasani organised a conference of ryots (*Praja Sanmilian*) at Sirajgunj which passed resolutions calling for the abolition of zamindaris and for legislation to provide various reliefs to indebted peasants. It also passed a resolution extending support to the Communal Award of August 1932.¹⁴⁰

The roving Maulana, with his simple and pious habits and great organising abilities, was accepted by the rural folk not only as a political leader, but also as a *pir*, known to have occult powers. Hounded out of Bengal by the zamindars and the police, he settled down on the wastelands of Ghagmari, a few miles from Dhubri. He set up yet another establishment in Bhasanir-char, an island in the Brahmaputra.¹⁴¹ Both were in Goalpara district where settlers already formed a fifth of the population. It was after the name of the latter place that he was nick-named 'the Maulana of Bhasani' or simply 'Bhasani', in due course.

While still maintaining his contacts with Bengal during the years 1928-36, Bhasani used to move up and down the Brahmaputra to visit the river-side immigrant Muslim villages in inaccessible areas of Assam, and he articulated their demand for land. The colonisation of Ghagmari and Bhasanir-char was also partly due to his own personal efforts. Suffering from the oppression of zamindars in East Bengal, people were in any case flocking to the Brahmaputra Valley in large numbers in order to settle down on its beckoning wastelands. By 1936 Bhasani emerged as the accredited leader of the Muslim immigrants of Goalpara. He stood as a candidate in the 1937 election and was returned to the Assam Legislative Assembly. He remained an important figure to reckon with in Assam politics during the next ten years.

138. Ibid, pp. 420-1.

139. D. N. Banerjee, *East Pakistan : A Case Study in Muslim Politics* (Delhi, 1969), p. 62ⁿ; also information gathered at Tangail by the present author in 1948.

140. Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajnitiir Panchas Bachhar* (In Bengali, Dacca, 1970), pp. 80-82.

141. Waliullah, n. 137, pp. 420-1.

Assembly Politics and Left Nationalism

MINISTRY-MAKING AND MINISTRY-BREAKING : 1937-38

Responsibility without Power

The Congress took part in the 1937 polls with the avowed objective of wrecking the new constitution from within. Twenty six out of twenty nine Congress candidates of the Brahmaputra Valley came out successful.¹ Altogether forty one candidates fought the election battle in Assam on the Congress ticket; of them thirty three were returned.² Whatever influence the Congress had in both the Valleys was conspicuously limited to non-Muslim general constituencies. The United People's Party led by T. R. Phookan stood for office acceptance and challenged the Congress in these constituencies. But, except for R. K. Chaudhuri, none of its leaders could get through. In the contest for the Jorhat seat for the Assembly, Heramba Prasad Barua (1893-1965), a planter and member of the Council of State for the years 1934-36, was defeated by Deveshwar Sharma (b. 1896), a Congressman.

Being the largest single party in the 108-member Assam Legislative Assembly, the Congress had fair prospects of forming a coalition Government, but had no such inclination initially. "The refusal to accept ministry and forming a solid bloc of opposition", wrote

1. 'APCC Gen. Secy's Report, 1937', *APCC Papers* : File No. 5, Packet 6, Congress Bhavan, Gauhati.
2. *Indian Annual Register*, (Jan.-June 1937), Vol. 1, p. 168 (o).
The minute book of the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association reveals that they had a political fund of rupees one lakh for use in the general constituencies. Obviously, the purpose was to ensure Congress defeat in the polls. Another one lakh rupees were at the disposal of the ITA's political secretariat at Shillong for other electoral purposes in 1937. For this information, I am grateful to Keith Ogborne of the University of Western Australia, Perth.

Gopi Nath Bardoloi to Rajendra Prasad on 24 February 1937, "will, to my mind be a more workable policy..."³

Under the Act of 1935, Governors were given veto powers even in the sphere of popular ministries. This was one reason why the Left nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose had argued initially with great vehemence for a policy of outright rejection of office. But a majority of the AICC leaders regarded office acceptance as the inevitable corollary of poll participation.

Their view was supported by Gandhiji who was apparently moved by two considerations. First, the widely extended franchise now introduced the people to a schooling in the art of self-government. Secondly, the Act of 1935 gave ample powers to the provincial ministers to propagate *khadi* and village industries and to drive out drinking and drug habits. Nehru finally yielded to this pressure. In course of a resolution in March 1937, the Congress Working Committee (AICC) permitted the formation of Congress ministries in those provinces where the party commanded a clear majority and the concerned Governors assured that their special powers would in no case be exercised. But in the absence of any such assurance, no ministries could be formed in the Congress-majority provinces. In an attempt to get out of this constitutional crisis, the Viceroy issued a message on 21 June to explain why a prior gubernatorial commitment on the issue was not possible. However, the message emphasized that the new constitution meant a real transfer of power so far as the ministerial sphere was concerned. This made the Congress Working Committee feel that the substance of their demand had been conceded. On 7 July 1937, the Congress formed ministries in seven provinces.⁴

Meanwhile Assam remained free from any constitutional deadlock. Right from the beginning, Governor Sir Robert Reid's "hopes had been centred on Sir Mohammad Saadulla" as Assam's first Chief Minister. The latter met the Governor on 15 March and took office as the head of a non-Congress coalition ministry on 1 April 1937—the inaugural day of the constitution.⁵

Apparently the Act of 1935 meant some advance in the sphere of

3. Bardoloi to Rajendra Prasad, 24 Feb. 1937, *APCC Papers* : Packet No. 35, n. 1.
4. Tarachand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. 4 (N. Delhi, 1972), pp. 226-9 and 271; B. N. Chaudhury, "Democracy in action", *Assam Tribune*, 11 April 1941.
5. Sir Robert Reid, *Years of Change in Bengal and Assam* (London, 1966), p. 87.

provincial Government. The system of nomination to the lower House was done away with. The franchise was extended from about three per cent to some eight per cent of the province's nine million population. This was done by widening the geographical coverage and also by lowering the property qualifications for voters. As a result, the size of the electorate expanded almost three times between 1929 and 1937—from 2,88,832 to 8,15,341 electors.

There were discouraging aspects too. Assam's hills areas were kept, by and large, outside the scope of the provincial autonomy as before. These were classified under the 1935 Act into two categories: (a) excluded areas and (b) partially excluded areas. Both were outside the ordinary competence of the provincial legislature. The Balipara and Sadiya Frontier Tracts, the Naga Hills district, the Lushai Hills district and the North Cachar Hills subdivision—were classified as 'excluded areas' and went unrepresented on the legislature. Their administration was vested in the Governor who acted 'in his discretion', without any reference being made to the cabinet. Of course, necessary expenditures and staff came from the provincial pool of resources.

On the other hand, the Garo Hills district, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills district (excluding Shillong) and the Mikir Hills were classified as 'partially excluded areas'. These areas enjoyed franchise to elect members to the legislature. Their administration was primarily a ministerial responsibility under the 1935 Act. However, as per provisions under its Section 52(e), the Governor had a special responsibility for their 'peace and good government'. In the exercise of his individual judgement, he could, therefore, override his ministers' advice in this sphere, too.

More than a fifth of the province's total expenditure budget was non-votable—some items of it not even open to discussion.⁶ On certain specified subjects, a private bill or resolution could be introduced in the legislature only after it had obtained the Governor's sanction. He had veto powers over all Acts of the legislature. He could even take over the province's administration into his own hands, by invoking Section 93 of the Act, whenever he thought there was a breakdown of the constitution. Lastly, there was the 22-member upper house, called the Assam Legislative Council, with all but four of its members elected on a more restricted franchise. The four

6. Governor's address to a joint sitting of both the Houses on 9 April, *ALAP* (1937), p. 40.

remaining were filled by nomination. This House acted as a brake on the popular will.

The existing provision for segregated electorates was expanded under the new constitution. The vested interests were thereby given heavy weightage in representation. For the province's less than three thousand European population, there were as many as nine seats; whereas for the million-strong resident plantation population, there were only four seats in the 108-member Assembly. The detailed composition of the Assembly is shown in the next page, in a tabular form.

The system of parliamentary politics that was built on such an electoral base could not but be divisive in its impact. The Congress party's strength in the Assembly did not exceed 33 on 1 April 1937. It did not have a single Muslim member other than Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (b. 1905). Even he was elected on an independent ticket. Nor did Congress have any electoral foothold in tribal and labour constituencies. Consequently, a large number of small nebulous groups emerged—the largest of them being the Assam and Surma Valley Muslim Parties. The League was founded in the Surma Valley by Abdul Matin Chaudhury, who had resigned from the Central Legislative Assembly to enter the provincial Assembly.⁷ The Muslim League Assembly party had altogether four members in April 1937; it was yet to emerge as a viable Assembly party. Under the circumstances, European planters and their allies emerged not only as an important but also as the most organised group. They held the balance between the Congress and Non-Congress camps. The legislature was thus destined to function as before under the benign gaze of the European big brother. He could manipulate the strings of power slackly in ordinary times, but firmly when necessary.

Sir Muhammad Saadulla had distinguished himself as the third Assamese ever to hold a master's degree and as a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court. He was an experienced parliamentarian with the longest record of membership in the province's Legislative Council. He had to his credit also an unbroken administrative experience of a whole decade, 1924 to 1934, first as a minister and later as an executive councillor. Moderate in political views and a pragmatist, he

7. Bureau of Public Information, Govt. of India, "Provincial Autonomy: Ministries and Parties in Assam (1937-45)": File No. F 106/8/45-R, Morgue and Reference Series, No. 1, Reforms Dept., NAI.

COMPOSITION OF THE ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
(Under the Act of 1935)

	No. of Seats	No. of Electors	Poll Parti- cipation Rate in contested Seats %
<i>Territorial Constituencies</i>			
1. Non-Muhammedan General (including seven reserved seats for Scheduled Castes*)	47	4,45,626	(76.0)
2. Muhammedan	34	2,77,677	(65.5)
3. Women	1	2,199	(55.5)
4. European	1	2,357	—
5. Indian Christian	1	5,743	—
<i>Special Constituencies</i>			
1. (a) Backward Plains Tribes	4	27,588	(46.3)
(b) Backward Hills Areas	5	18,338	(64.6)
2. (a) European Planters/	7	975	—
(b) Indian Planters	2	344	—
3. (a) Commerce and Industry (European)	1	18	—
(b) Commerce and Industry (Indian)	1	197	—
4. Tea Garden Labour	4	34,279	—
<i>Total</i>	108	8,15,241	(71.3)

*Four untouchable castes of the Brahmaputra Valley and ten of the Surma Valley were designated as Scheduled Castes.

Source: East India Constitutional Reforms: Elections—*Return Showing the Results of Elections in India 1937* (New Delhi 1937), pp. 100-5.

was ready to cooperate with every move of the Raj for constitutional reforms, right from the beginnings of his career. Claiming to promote the interests of the relatively advanced Assamese (Asamiya)

Muslims of his own Valley, he was determined to run the Government with whatever support he could mobilise on his side—British planters not excluded. His five-member Coalition Ministry that included R. K. Chaudhuri, Nichols-Roy and two Muslim ministers from the Surma Valley, was solidly backed by the European bloc in the Assembly.

B. K. Das of the Surma Valley—the seniormost and ablest parliamentarian on the Congress side—agreed to contest for Speakership. This meant that the leader of the Congress party had to be from the Brahmaputra Valley, and the choice fell on G. N. Bardoloi. A lawyer by profession, Bardoloi was not with the Congress during the years 1930-36, nor had he any legislative experience. At a crucial hour of Assam politics, he came out of Phookan's influence and got himself elected to the Assembly on a Congress ticket.⁸ The sudden demise of N. C. Bardaloi in 1936, the election of Kuladhar Chaliha to the Central legislature in his place, the belated entry of B. R. Medhi into the provincial Assembly through a by-election in 1938 and Omeo Kumar Das's reluctance to assume the responsibility—all these helped Bardoloi's almost overnight rise to the leadership. For the deputy leadership of the Assembly Congress party, the unanimous choice fell on K. Deb, and after his sudden death in June 1937, on Arun Kumar Chanda (1899-1947), both of the Surma Valley. Incidentally, B. N. Chaudhury was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly after B. K. Das had resigned therefrom to enter into Assam politics.

The Saadulla Ministry, a Government without a programme, was but a leaking boat. This was clear from the defeat of the official candidate for Speakership on 7 April. With the Muslim League opposed to him, Saadulla had to lean all the more on the European bloc. Bringing out the true character of the ministry, Dakshinaranjan Gupta-Chaudhury, a Congress legislator, pungently remarked:

“... The white bureaucrats speak through their brown successors—the grip of imperialism—the chains of slavery tighten. It was well, sir, that the new constitution was inaugurated on

8. Bardoloi suspended his law practice and underwent a jail term in the Non-cooperation days. Together with Tayyebulla, he was made a joint-secretary to APCC and was also elected as an AICC member in December 1926. The other four AICC members from Assam were N. C. Bardaloi, T. R. Phookan, Faiznur Ali and Kuladhar Chaliha. *The Bengalee*, 24 Dec. 1926. It is interesting to note that none of the above-mentioned joined the 1930 movement.

All-Fools' Day—I mean the 1st of April, and the country has been befooled".⁹

The Assembly proceedings came to a climax when, as per strategy set out by the All-India Congress high command, all Congress legislators, except the Speaker, staged a walk-out and a boycott of the Governor's address on 8 April with a view to expose the futility of the Constitution. The Governor missed their company at the official garden party the same evening.¹⁰

Saadulla's Leaking Boat

As soon as serious business started in the first budget session (3 August-1 September 1937), the Saadulla Ministry began to reel under heavy attacks. The budget Saadulla presented showed after many years a small surplus, despite the persisting economic depression. But this only indicated his failure to depart from the orthodox and bureaucratic principles of public finance. Saadulla suggested that Assam be assigned the whole or a portion of the central excise tax proceeds on petrol and kerosene produced within the province, as was done in the case of Bengal in respect of the jute export duty.¹¹ He also felt that the heavy expenditure on the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force, should be borne entirely by the Centre.¹² This latter demand was an old one raised in the legislature as early as 1926 by moderates like Nilmoni Phukan.¹³ Both the propositions gained unanimous support, but with no immediate results. It took four years to devolve the maintenance cost of the Assam Rifles on the Centre, through an amendment of the Assam Rifles Act, 1920.¹⁴

Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed moved an adjournment on 4 August to draw the attention of the House to the sufferings of retrenched and locked-out Dhubri Match Factory workers and to the hunger strike of their leader, Bipinchandra Chakravarty. The Government managed to defeat the motion by 51 to 47 votes.¹⁵

Bardoloi, the leader of the Opposition, launched an able attack on the budget. It was wretched, he said, in respect of its enunciated principles, as well as in its operational details. According to him,

9. Speech on 10 August, *ALAP* (1937), p. 512.

10. *ALAP* (1937), pp. 1-11 and 35-36; Reid, 1

11. *IAR* (July-Dec. 1937), Vol. 2, p. 237.

12. Speech on 3 August, *ALAP* (1937), p. 85.

13. *The Mussalman*, 19 March 1926.

14. File No. 159/40-R, 1940, GI Reforms Dept., NAI.

15. 3-4 August, *ALAP* (1937), pp. 75-76.

the maintenance of an army of occupation, an expensive public service and an acute economic exploitation resulting in moral degradation of the Assamese people—all these were among the causes of Assam's non-development. He charged that even the promised parliamentary form of Government had been subverted in Assam through the European party's support to an otherwise minority Government.¹⁶

From 12 August onwards, the Government began to sustain a series of heavy defeats—as many as eleven in twenty days till 31 August. It started with Abdul Matin Chaudhury's Local Rates Amendment Bill providing for reduced local rates, which was passed by 67 to 37 votes. In an attempt to delay the measure, the Revenue Minister wanted the Governor to fix the time for its implementation. But his motion was rejected even without a division.¹⁷

More disastrous was the Government's defeat on the question of retaining divisional commissioners—the administration's two white elephants—one in each Valley. As early as 1926, these offices were found somewhat superfluous by the Webster Committee. The Retrenchment Committee of 1931, set up by the fourth Reformed Council, recommended abolition of one of them. But the proposal never found favour with the Secretary of State for India.

The Assembly voted, 63 to 11, on 17 August 1937 to refuse the entire supply for the pay and establishment of divisional commissioners. A constitutional problem cropped up. Was a provincial legislature within its rights in refusing support to posts held by Indian Civil Service cadre? The matter was referred by the Speaker to the Advocate-General of Bengal and Assam for his legal opinion. The latter told the House that its decision was *intra vires* of the constitution. Accordingly, the Speaker's ruling of 27 August was that the refusal was perfectly in order and binding on the Government.

Saadulla had earlier agreed to move the Secretary of State for the abolition of one commissionership—that for the Surma Valley Division. Now he had to give the staff of both the commissioners three months' notice of discharge. In the December session, the Government presented a supplementary demand to meet the committed expenditure of four months, along with an assurance that the relevant staff would be discharged with effect from 1 January 1938. The demand was conceded by the Assembly. Acting contrary to his

16. Speech on 10 August, *ALAP* (1937), pp. 512-7.

17. *IAR*, (July-Dec. 1937), Vol. 2, p. 239.

Second Saadulla Ministry : 5 Feb.-18 Sept. 1938

By the end of August 1937, it became increasingly clear to Saadulla that he would have to bank heavily on his co-religionists from the Surma Valley for even a bare survival. For, they formed the overwhelming majority of the Assembly's Muslim members. Led by Abdul Matin Chaudhury, the Muslim League Assembly party had by then increased its strength to ten, and it sided with the Congress on most occasions. "Grateful mention must be made of the invaluable support lent by the Surma Valley Independent Group, the Moslem League Party and the United Moslem Party", reported the secretary of the Assam Assembly Congress party to Rajendra Prasad on 29 October 1937, "but for whom the Congress Party might not have scored the victories it did in the last August session".²⁷

This trying situation forced Saadulla to woo the Muslim League. He attended its All-India annual conference held at Lucknow in October 1937. There he committed himself to advising his party's Muslim members to join the League.²⁸ For a cabinet reshuffle, he first tried to persuade his two aged and inefficient Muslim colleagues to resign. As both of them refused to oblige, Saadulla himself resigned on 4 February 1938. He formed a new ministry with Abdul Matin Chaudhury and Munawwar Ali, both of Muslim League and R. K. Chaudhuri, Nichols-Roy and Akshay Kumar Das, the last-mentioned a scheduled caste member, as his colleagues.²⁹ The reconstituted Government faced the next budget session on 15 February with regained confidence. Rai Saheb Sonadhar Senapati complimented Saadulla in the upper House for giving a start to the scheduled castes politics in the province. For it was Saadulla who had prompted their deputation to give evidence before the Simon Commission.... "The sight of a scheduled caste Minister in the Cabinet", said Senapati "has made me feel that I have begun to enter the fold of the Caste Hindus".³⁰

27. S. R. Dutt to Rajendra Prasad, 29 Oct. 1937, *RPC*, n. 18.

28. Khalid B. Sayeed, *Pakistan : the Formative Phase 1857-1948* (2nd edn., New York/Karachi 1968), pp. 87 and 213.

In reply to a question on 5 Sept. 1938, Saadulla claimed that he was a member of the Muslim League since before his election to the House. *ALAP* (1938), p. 11. Even if so, this connection was perfunctory.

29. *JAR* (Jan-July 1938), Vol. 1, p. 229; Bureau of Public Information, GI, Morgue and Reference Series No. 11, New Delhi, Feb. 1, 1946, File No. 106/8/45-R, Reforms Dept., NAI.

30. Speech on 16 Feb., *ALCP* (1938), pp. 33-34.

The second budget session was weathered by Saadulla somewhat better. The House voted, 50 to 49, to reject a no-confidence motion on 21 February.³¹ All the budget demands were passed in full, except the provision for the commissioners' staff. The instability of party alignments in the Assembly nevertheless soon further worsened with the changed Congress attitude to the coalition for office acceptance.

Outside the Assembly, too, the situation was fast turning against Saadulla. There was widespread unrest amongst workmen in the oil fields, collieries and tea gardens and amongst tenants of certain zamindars. The 1938 local board elections were turned into a political battle, and the APCC claimed to have secured 65 per cent of the votes cast in contested general seats.³² Of 324 elective seats in 16 local boards, as many as 86, or an average 26 per cent, were to represent planter interests. Nevertheless, the prospect of these boards being captured by the Congress was not altogether bleak. But Saadulla abused his power and packed the local boards with such nominated members as would side with the planter group.³³ This raised a storm of protests all over Assam.

Because of the nomination system, the Congress was able to get chairmanship only in four local boards. On 5 September 1938, an adjournment was moved by Omeo Kumar Das to discuss the abuse of official nomination to various local boards. It was duly debated.³⁴ The mockery of local self-government was thus widely discussed and became a major issue of the anti-Saadulla agitation.

Bardoloi Throws His Net

The party policy did not permit a Congress coalition Government in Assam in July 1937 when the Congress ministries were installed in several other provinces. However, there was no bar against attempts

31. *IAR* (Jan-July 1938), Vol. 1, pp. 229-30.

32. "APCC's Report for the year 1938 to the President, National Congress, Nov. 1938", *APCC Papers*, File No. 5, Packet-6, n. 1.

33. The 23-member Jorhat Local Board, e.g., had eleven general and nine other elective seats, besides three to be filled by nomination. Congress won nine seats and failed understandably to establish control over the Board. In Tezpur all the eleven elective general seats of the Local Board had been captured by Congress. But a *mauzadar*, defeated at the polls, was inducted into the Board through the backdoor of nomination. Later European, Muslim and nominated members combined to elect him as the Board's Chairman.

34. 5-7 Sept., *ALAP* (1938), pp. 83-84 and 226; *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1938-39, p. ii; *Assam Tribune*, 25 April 1941. Only in three of the nineteen local Boards—Dhubri, Goalpara and Sunamganj—there was no separate representation for the planters.

inclined—nay decided to permit the coalition”.³⁹ Hurried telephonic consultations were held with Rajendra Prasad and Sardar Patel. While the former was in agreement with Azad, the latter approved of Bose’s strategy. That Bose could finally have his way was possible only because of the connivance of provincial leaders and Patel—the chairman of the Congress Parliamentary Sub-committee. Later Bose reminded Gandhiji:

“... But if Sardar Patel had not providentially come to my rescue, Maulana Sahib could never have given in at Shillong and perhaps you would not have supported my view-point against Maulana Sahib when the Working Committee met at Delhi. In that case there would not have been a Coalition Ministry in Assam”.⁴⁰

Bose also helped Bardoloi to iron out differences with Bengali Congressmen of the Surma Valley over the personnel of the ministry-in-making. Initially, only five non-Muslim ministers were named, and the Governor was told that three Muslim ministers would also be appointed soon.

The formation of the Bardoloi Ministry was announced in a gazette extra-ordinary published about noon on 19 September. On the same day even before the new ministers had taken their oaths, Saadulla tabled a no-confidence motion, signed by 56 members—a clear majority. The Speaker disallowed the motion since, technically, a no-confidence could not be moved against ministers who had not yet been sworn in. Bardoloi also prevailed upon him to adjourn the House *sine die* to avoid a critical situation. Under the chairmanship of F. W. Hockenhull, the leader of the European (planter) party, all the fifty-six members in the Opposition met together in the Assembly premises and unanimously resolved to remain together in all circumstances against the minority Government. The oath-taking ceremony was suddenly postponed by the Acting Governor, and those few copies of the gazette extra-ordinary that had leaked out into circulation were recalled. However, at this peak of confusion, it was soon realised by the Acting Governor that his refusal to administer oath to ministers, after the gazette notification, would be scandalous. On 20 September, therefore, the oath-taking formality

39. M. Tayyebulla, *Between the Symbol and the Idol at Last* (New Delhi, 1964), pp. 100-1.

40. Bose to Gandhi, dated Bombay 21 Dec. 1938, copy of letter in the possession of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, first published in L. A. Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940* (Delhi, 1974), p. 284.

was completed posthumously, and the new ministry started functioning.⁴¹ Thus, the nine-day drama that began on 12 September ended happily for Congressmen as a comedy. The minority Government was of course sure of becoming a majority one in no time.

First Bardoloi Ministry : 19 Sept. '38-16 Nov. '39

The five ministers who took their oath in September were G. N. Bardoloi, Ramnath Das (Sch. Caste), Akshay Kumar Das (Sch. Caste), Kamini Kumar Sen and Rupnath Brahma (1902-1968)—a Tribal League leader. Gradually three Muslim Ministers—Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Ali Hyder Khan and Mahmud Ali—were also taken in to complete the ministry by 20 October. The new ministers faced the Assembly in December. It voted, 54 to 50, to reject a no-confidence motion which was moved on 8 December. A huge crowd waiting outside the Assembly celebrated the victory with jubilations. Saadulla and Abdul Matin Chaudhury were no doubt behind the no-confidence move, but they did not take part in the debate. It was the leader of the European party who emerged as the *de facto* Opposition leader.⁴²

In the ministry thus formed, Bardoloi was practically the lone Congressman with a pre-election commitment. But his own personal qualities and the abilities of his colleague, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, made up for his team's shortcomings, until it was put under the strain of a mass industrial unrest. In the eyes of the Governor, Chief Minister Bardoloi was "a devout Gandhian, honest, obstinate, not very intelligent and with small gift of leadership".⁴³ Wavell, the Viceroy, found in him in 1946 "a more forcible and quicker intelligence than the Khan Sahib but not a very pleasant personality".⁴⁴ Opinions varied among others, including Tayyebulla—Bardoloi's rival for control over the party apparatus—as to how much of a Gandhian he was. In course of confidential notings on an official file, when Bardoloi was a security prisoner, Saadulla assessed him rather uncharitably. He wrote on 1 October, 1943:

"I know Mr. Bardoloi personally. He was my student for a year ... and then a colleague in the Gauhati Bar. He has been

41. Tayyebulla, n. 39, pp. 101-2; *IAR* (July-Dec. 1938), Vol. 2, p. 183. For an official version of the episode, *Report of the Working of the Assam Legislative Assembly 1937-45* (Shillong, 1946), pp. 19-21.

42. *IAR*, n. 41, pp. 184-5; Reid, n. 5, p. 125.

43. Reid, n. 5, p. 125.

44. P. Moon ed., *Wavell the Viceroy's Journal* (London, 1973), p. 233. Khan Sahib was the Chief Minister of North West Frontier Province.

pitchforked into this position by adventitious circumstances. He was not a keen Congressman ever and did not go to jail in 1921 or 1931 movements".⁴⁵

However, a careful reader of Tayyebulla's memoirs and Bardoloi's correspondence with Gandhiji and with other leaders cannot but conclude that Bardoloi knew the game of politics rather too well. Despite many shortcomings, and contrary to Governor Reid's impression, he had enough gift of leadership to have his way at every critical stage, and with popular support. This was so because he could always strike a balance between national and narrowly Assamese interests, as the subsequent events indicated.

The Bardoloi Government was committed to a programme and, therefore, was able to rouse popular expectations. the Congress accepted office—he said—with the definite object and purpose "of easing the burden of taxation on the poor and of providing means for the uplift and betterment of the masses".⁴⁶ Some features of its programme—such as the abolition of the second chamber, the reduction of the land revenue burden on the peasantry, the progressive eradication of opium and the abolition of commissioners' establishments—were however no longer controversial issues. Saadulla, too, stood for them, though not vigorously in practice. Was it not under Saadulla's orders that all political detenus (terrorist suspects), except one, had been released and six political convicts repatriated from the Andamans, after A. K. Chanda had raised the issue in the Assembly on 27 August 1937? The process of political prisoners' release, so started, was completed by the new Bardoloi Government, in response to a resolution moved again by Chanda and unanimously adopted by the Assembly on 5 Dec. 1938. All the ten terrorist convicts serving various terms of imprisonment were released by 13 December.⁴⁷

The opium eradication policy was also in operation long before Bardoloi assumed power. The opium revenue progressively fell from Rs. 38,26,000 in 1927-28 to Rs. 10,07,000 by 1938-39. This was because the recorded consumption of opium gradually decreased meanwhile from 722 to 183 maunds. The opium prohibition

45. Confidential B, 1945, File No.—C 241/1945, (AS). Saadulla was wrong to suggest that Bardoloi did not go to the jail in 1921.

46. Budget speech on 9 March, *ALCP* (1939), p. 13.

47. *Ibid*, p. 22; *Assam Ad. Rep.* 1937-38, p. 1; *IAR* (July-Dec. 1937), Vol. 2, p. 242; *IAR* (July-Dec. 1938), Vol. 2, p. 184; *ALAP* (1939), pp. 13 and 258.

scheme was inaugurated by the Congress coalition Government in the two subdivisions of Dibrugarh and Sibsagar on 15 April 1939. Omeo Kumar Das was appointed the honorary prohibition commissioner. About 10,000 registered and 5,000 unregistered addicts were cured of opium habit through hospitalisation. By the end of March 1940, the opium revenue came down to Rs. 5,20,000 and the relevant consumption, to 94 maunds.⁴⁸ Installed Chief Minister for the third time, Saadulla, declared 26 February 1941 as the Prohibition Day and brought all non-Excluded areas of the province under the total opium prohibition scheme with effect from 1 March 1941. Thus by adopting a progressive opium prohibition programme, the new Government only accelerated the established trend.

So was the case with the reduction of land revenue burden. The 33 per cent remission of land revenue assessment for the year 1938-39, as effected by Saadulla, had amounted to Rs. 28 lakhs. This relief further increased to Rs. 40 lakhs a year in 1939-40 and 1940-41, because of a 50 per cent remission in the case of estates paying Rs. 16 or less, and from 30 to 20 per cent remission in the case of other estates, under the Congress commitments.⁴⁹

In its attitude to labour unrest also, the Bardoloi Government did not basically differ from its predecessor, as will be revealed later. What was new in the Congress programme was a direct and bold confrontation with the European planters in fiscal matters and a departure from the erstwhile orthodox policy of seeing much virtue in surplus or balanced budgets. To compensate for the loss on account of the reduced excise and land revenue collections, the new Finance Minister, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, introduced five new tax efforts. These were:

- (i) The Assam Sales of Motor Spirit and Lubricant Taxation Act, 1939;
- (ii) The Assam Sales Tax Act, 1939;
- (iii) The Assam Amusements and Betting Tax Act, 1939;
- (iv) The Assam Excise (Amendment) Act, 1939; and
- (v) The Assam Agricultural Income Tax, 1939.

48. *ALCP* (1929), Vol. 9, p. 4; Tayyebulla, n. 39, p. 56; Bardoloi's budget speech on 9 March, *ALCP* (1939), p. 22; *JAR* (Jan-June 1940) Vol. 1, p. 285; R. K. Chaudhuri's budget speech on 3 March, *ALCP* (1941), p. 167; Saadulla's budget speech on 22 Feb., *ALCP* (1940), pp. 13-14. Relevant Reports of Excise Dept.

49. Saadulla's speech, n. 48; *Assam Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1939; *ibid*, 26 Sept. 1941.

The Assam Sales Tax Act was, however, not given effect to in apprehension of exodus of trade to neighbouring Bengal, where there was no such legislation.⁵⁰

The introduction of agricultural income taxation, primarily to tax the plantations, proved to be literally an uphill task.⁵¹ Planters—both European and Indian—let out a howl of protests. Even a section of Congressmen with plantation interests started feeling uneasy. Rich peasants were afraid that some of them, on the wrong side of the exemption limit, would have to pay the tax. Maulana Bhasani, opposed the bill on the ground that the surplus-yielding farmers would be unable to contribute to agricultural capital formation if they were to pay the tax. Saadulla's motion for circulating the bill for eliciting public opinion was defeated. The Select Committee, which finished its job in two sittings in March, met the rich peasants' objection by raising the exemption limit from Rs. 2,000 per annum to Rs. 3,000. The House then voted, 57 to 28, to pass the modified bill on 6 April 1939. Even thereafter the Indian Tea Association doggedly continued its battle on the plea that the bill was discriminatory to tea producers *vis a vis* the producers of ordinary crops. It pulled strings in London to invoke the Governor's veto power, but the Secretary of State for India did not agree. Meanwhile the upper House, where vested interests were in a majority, rejected the bill on 9 May 1939.

After much strain and tussle, on 4 August a joint session of both the Houses finally voted, 65 to 56, to pass the bill. The rates of agricultural income taxation were fixed by the Assam Finance Act on 10 August. Having won the battle, the Government, however, declared its willingness to remove the inequitable clauses, if any, through an amending bill or appropriate provisions in the statutory rules. But before any such follow-up action could be taken, the

50. Atulchandra Sarma, *A Study of Assam Finances—Structure and Trend 1948 to 1965-66* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Gauhati, March 1971), pp. 161-2.

51. It was only since the 1921 movement that a section of the Assamese planters had begun to lend support to the idea of taxing the tea industry for general benefit. Such taxation would have hit their own interests no doubt, but their European rivals' much more. There was an increasing realisation on their part that such gestures alone would help sustain their hegemony over the local anti-imperialist movements.

Himself a petty planter, Kuladhar Chaliha moved a resolution in the Third Reformed Council recommending a levy of three pies on every pound of tea manufactured within Assam, so that the heavy Government reliance on opium as a source of revenue could be decreased. The Council voted, 24 to 19, to throw out his motion.—*The Mussalman*, 5 Jan. 1926.

Congress coalition ministry was out. With the come-back of Saadulla, statutory rules were framed in a manner suiting the planters.⁵²

Of the remaining issues of the Congress programme, the immigrant problem arising out of the Line System and the growing labour unrest—both defied any solution within the framework of provincial autonomy. The Congress coalition ministry betrayed hesitancy and indecision on such issues and exposed itself to severe criticism from even its own ranks. But in the meantime, a new situation developed towards relieving it of its committed responsibilities. Great Britain was at war with Germany on 3 September, and India was declared a belligerent the following day. As the declared war aims did not include India's independence, the Congress Working Committee meeting at Wardha on 22 October called upon all the Congress ministries to resign.

Bardoloi did not want to resign immediately, for he had yet to spell out the official policy on immigration with reference to the report of the Line System Committee. It was feared that once he was out, the old system of unrestrained immigration would be revived by the next Government, much to the detriment of indigenous interests and his party's popularity. Press reports that the Congress coalition party was sending a deputation to the Congress Parliamentary Board for reconsideration of Assam's case as a special one was never contradicted. The APCC met in a plenary session at Sib-sagar on 7 November 1939 to consider *inter alia* also the question of resignation. Several speakers at the meeting cast aspersions on Bardoloi for not resigning so long. Both B. R. Medhi and B. C. Bhagavati reportedly charged the cabinet of lust for power. The meeting directed the Congress coalition ministry to resign not later than 15 November. It clung to power till that dead-line and was the last of the Congress ministries to resign. Because of this procrastination, Saadulla had enough ground to remark caustically on 27 February 1940 that Bardoloi had resigned not to vindicate his moral stand against war efforts, but under the goadings of the Congress high command.⁵³

The Last Straw : Nichols-Roy

Resignation was not the end of the story. For some time past,

52. *IAR* (Jan-June 1939), Vol. 1, pp. 251 and 254; Bhasani's speech on 3 August at a joint session of both the Houses, *ALCP* (1939), pp. 27-28; P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), pp. 167-200.
53. *IAR* (Jan-June 1940), Vol. 1, p. 204; *Assam Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1939.

Nichols-Roy was with the Congress coalition party and would have perhaps joined the ministry had there been no stiff opposition from the hills people he represented. Now a plan was hatched to keep Saadulla out of power by bringing another coalition in power, with the necessary Congress support. The new coalition party that emerged overnight with Nichols-Roy as its leader, and Ali Hyder Khan as president, pledged to execute the Congress constructive programme. It claimed allegiance of twenty three members and hoped to form a Government with the backing of the 35-member Congress party. Brisk telephonic consultations were held on 15 November 1939 with Abul Kalam Azad and B. C. Roy of Calcutta for exploring the prospect. Baidyanath Mukherjee (b. 1900), a confidant of Bardoloi, rushed to Calcutta to plead before Azad. However, Mukherjee was told that no such Congress support could be pledged without its Working Committee's prior approval. In reply to Nichols-Roy's letter of 29 November 1939, Rajendra Prasad informed him that the Working Committee had met at Allahabad, but did not approve of the plan. After his talk with Bardoloi in Calcutta, Azad finally issued a public statement on behalf of the Congress Parliamentary Sub-Committee on 14 December 1939, setting at rest all speculations about the Congress support to Nichols-Roy.⁵⁴

The third Saadulla Ministry had to be double the size of the first one and bigger than the Bardoloi Ministry for ensuring the necessary support. Six ministers were sworn in on 17 November and another four within a few weeks. The new cabinet met on 16 December after Nichols-Roy's dreams were shattered, and then it dispersed for a merry Christmas. Rupnath Brahma, who had been in Bardoloi's team, was the last and the tenth minister to be sworn in on 9 January, 1940.⁵⁵

INDUSTRIAL UNREST AND EMERGENCE OF TRADE UNIONS

Strike and Lock-out at Dhubri

As early as in September 1937, A. K. Chanda—then a young barrister sympathetic to leftist thinking—sounded an ominous

54. *Assam Tribune*, 17 Nov. 1939 and 22 Dec. 1939; Nichols-Roy to Rajendra Prasad, 29 Nov. 1939, and Rajendra Prasad to Nichols-Roy, 2 Dec. 1939, *AICC Files*, No. PL-32, 1939-40, NMML.

55. Bureau of Public Information, n. 29; Reid, n. 5, p. 134.

warning to the Assam Legislative Assembly. "The spectre of class war", he said "is worrying the world and I can see that this spectre is looming larger and larger on the horizons of this country every-day".⁵⁶ Although guilty of some exaggeration, Chanda was prophetic. The persistent economic depression of the 1930s had hit hard not only the agriculturists, but also the province's trade and industries. Planters and industrialists naturally tried to shift the burden on to workers' shoulders. The latter, of course, resisted. On the peasant front, too, old-style Ryot *Sabhas* were giving way, here and there, to militant *Kishan Sabhas* (or *Samitis*) of a new type. The socialist and communist ideology began to play a significant role in organising students, workers and peasants on a radical platform.

The lingering strike (and lock-out) of the organised workers of the Swedish-owned Assam Match Company since 14 December 1936 came into prominence when, on 30 April 1937, the management fruitlessly tried to resume production with the help of new recruits. Beside arrests, one novel method adopted by the Saadulla Government to deal with the strike committee was to make twenty of their activists special constables for maintaining peace. The hunger strike by their leader Bipin Chakravarty, and the animated Assembly debate that followed, failed to pressurise the authorities concerned. The Board of Conciliation that was set up achieved nothing. Defected workers drifted back to work by the end of December 1937.⁵⁷ After Dhubri, Dibrugarh came into limelight when a strike of the steamer ghat workers there was successfully led by Kedarnath Goswami (1901-65), then a Congressman.

Saga of the Digboi Oil Strike

The Dhubri strike was of marginal concern to the Government, since the employment at the match factory there had at no time exceeded 500. So was that of Dibrugarh steamer ghat. But the smouldering unrest, at the little oil town of Digboi in Lakhimpur district, was a different matter as its 10,000 workers were concentrated in a sensitive industrial and plantation area. The Administrative Report for the year 1937-38 did not fail to note the signs of trouble brewing there. Jawaharlal Nehru addressed meetings

56. 1 Sept. *ALAP* (1937), p. 1878.

57. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's speech, 4 August, *ALAP* (1937), pp. 188-90; *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1937-38, p. 1; A. K. Das to A. K. Chanda, 1 March 1938, *ALAP* (1938), pp. 583-6.

at Moran, Khowang, Dibrugarh, Chabua, Tinsukia, Doomdoo and Digboi in the first week of December. He talked of capitalist exploitation with reference to the Assam Oil Company (a subsidiary of the Burma Oil Company) and the British plantation companies. Although Nehru's remarks at Doomdoo had little effect, "the situation at Digboi", wrote the superintendent of police to his superior, "gives cause for some concern".⁵⁸

The oil company workers were agitated over the questions of low wages, the retrenchment and the non-recognition of bungalow servants as company employees.⁵⁹ A general meeting of the workers was held on 22 February 1938, in consequence of which the AOC Labour Union was formed. In their letter of 29 April, the company laid down certain preconditions for the Union's acceptance to facilitate its recognition. But these preconditions were not accepted. The Union applied to the Government on 27 July for its registration under the Trade Unions Act, 1926. It also simultaneously submitted a 12-point charter of demands, as well as a 14-day strike notice to the company. The company immediately moved the Government for a conciliation. A Court of Enquiry, consisting of J. C. Higgins (chairman), O. K. Das and Sayidur Rahman, was formed by Saadulla on 16 August 1938.

The Court of Enquiry sat for a month from 29 August to 29 October 1938. The Union, having its registration under the Trade Union Act by 7 August, at first cooperated. But when a bungalow servant was dismissed for the 'offence' of giving evidence before this Court, it refused to cooperate any longer. Meanwhile Bardoloi stepped into the shoes of Saadulla. All eyes now turned to the new Government for a settlement within the framework of its declared

58. *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1937-38, p. i; Supdt. of Police, Lakhimpur to Deputy I. G. of Police, Assam, 15 Dec. 1937, D. O. No. 1-1/1-33 cited in Confidential B, Dec. 1937, Nos 68-135, File No. 171-C/37, (AS).

59. The account of the Digboi strike herefrom is culled from the following sources, except when stated otherwise.

J. C. Higgins, *Report of the Court of Enquiry* (7 Jan. 1939) and the relevant Govt. of Assam Resolution of 9 Feb. cited in *Assam Gazette Extra-ordinary*, No. 3, 10 Feb. 1939; K. K. Hajra, *Report of the Board of Conciliation* (8 August 1939) and M. N. Mukerji, *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Affairs at Digboi*, (25 Nov. 1939); relevant Govt. of Assam Resolution of 18 Dec. 1939, *Assam Gazette*, 20 Dec. 1939—Part II; 6 May *ALCP* (1939), pp. 190-1 and 198; *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1938-39, p. ii; *IAR* (Jan-June 1939), Vol. 1, pp. 256 and 357-8; "A note issued from Swaraj Bhavan, Allahabad, 7 July 1939 with reference to Rajendra Prasad's statement", cited in *IAR* (July-Dec. 1939), Vol. 2, pp. 206-8; Govt.'s reply to S. Barua on 21 March, *ALAP* (1940), pp. 1095-8; *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1939-40, p. i; *ALCP* (1939), pp. 198, 157-8, and 323-3.

policy. The Bardoloi Government's Resolution of 9 February endorsed only the unanimous part of the Court of Enquiry's recommendations which was received on 7 January 1939. Neither the demand for a wage increase nor that for a 44-hour week was accepted. Even in clear cases of victimisation and wrongful dismissals, the Court failed to pronounce their judgment. The agitation therefore continued.

While the tripartite talks dragged on till the end of March 1939, the company was busy preparing lists for further retrenchment. Between 14 November 1938 and 1 April 1939, at least 56 workers were discharged or dismissed. In the face of these provocations, the Union became increasingly critical of the impotence of the Bardoloi Ministry on which it had put so much trust. By a notification on 20 March 1939, the company extended recognition to the Union, but at the same time saw that the non-unionised workers could by-pass the Union to represent their cases directly as before. The Union decided therefore to go on a week-long protest strike from 3 April. By 11 April the total number of the victimised workers increased to 74.

The strike was complete. More than 6,000 workers at Digboi and 4,000 workers at Tinsukia, where the company had its tin container factory, struck work. Even sweepers and bungalow servants joined in. Only 138 men were allowed by the Union to remain on their jobs to maintain the minimum essential services. Following the company's provocative threat of dismissal of all strikers, the strike persisted indefinitely even beyond the initially stipulated period. Pressurised by vested interests and, to the discomfiture of Congressmen, the Government had to provide armed escorts to the 'blacklegs' recruited by the company. Chief Minister Bardoloi came on a visit to Digboi and Makum on 14 April and publicly disapproved of the continuous strike. On 16 April, the day Bardoloi left the place, there was a large public meeting attended by several Assembly members and the APCC president, Hemchandra Baruah. In course of his speech, Baruah criticised the role of the police and demanded that they should act upon the Congress Coalition Government's orders alone.

The situation took suddenly a violent turn when three workers were shot dead by an Assam Rifles patrol on the night of 18 April. This incident roused anti-Government feelings all over Assam. The findings of the judicial enquiry into the firing that started on 23 April did not satisfy the workers. The Government therefore appointed

on 10 July M. N. Mukerji, a retired Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, to enquire into the Digboi affairs.

Because of the strikers' resistance, production could be resumed only partially from 25 May. The AICC session held at Bombay on 24-27 June 1939 deplored the company's refusal to accept a board of conciliation to go into such details of the dispute as the timing and manner of strikers' return to their jobs. It counselled the Assam Government to make the decisions of such boards binding on the disputants through suitable legislation. It also threatened retaliation in the form of refusal by the Congress coalition ministry to renew the company's oilfield leases, which were soon to expire. In a series of meetings held in June, July and August all over Assam, the coalition Government and its Chief Minister were charged, by local trade unionists and left nationalists, of bad faith and weakness.

On 23 July 1939, K. K. Hajra, I.C.S., was appointed as the Board of Conciliation to try for a settlement of the dispute. He found that out of 2,412 loyal workers working within the company's precincts, 762 were old hands and 1,650, new recruits. As against its pre-strike employment of 6,350 workers, the company put its labour requirement now at some 5,560 hands. This meant that the declared vacancies could absorb only some 3,238 strikers, leaving the rest to their lot. The labour case was represented before the Board of Conciliation by J. N. Upadhyay, Sadhu Singh, M.A. Chaudhury, Pritam Singh and Jadunath Bhuyan—president, vice-president and secretaries, respectively, of the AOC Labour Union. Sudhin Pramanik, a distinguished Bengal trade unionist, was also present in the conciliation proceedings. In the twenties, he had taken a prominent role in a steel workers' strike at Tatanagar and was now elected by the Digboi workers as the secretary of their Strike Committee. The Hajra report, submitted on 8 August 1939, however, recommended that all strikers should be called back to their jobs and all new recruits discharged. Any surplus labour above the required strength could be later discharged after a discussion at the works council to be set up soon. The company would not naturally accept these recommendations. The Bardoloi Government, too, postponed their further consideration, even publication, until the submission of the Mukerji Report.

On 4 September, the Digboi-Tinsukia area was declared protected under the Defence of India Rules. The district magistrate explained the implications of such protected areas in a meeting of the

strikers. Orders banning meetings and processions were issued under Section 144, CrPC. The six-month old strike collapsed under these fierce attacks. Himself suffering under a ban, Pramanik issued a frantic appeal—reminding the AICC members of their commitment. “The W. C. and the AICC ought to therefore direct the Assam Ministry by a clear resolution”, he wrote on 7 October, “to resist firmly any such interference in its administrative and labour policy and undue application of war emergency measures and to implement without further delay the AICC’s last resolution ‘to forthwith undertake legislation for making the acceptance of the decision of the Conciliation Board obligatory’ ”.⁶⁰

Nothing of course came out of Pramanik’s appeal. Nine principal Union and Strike Committee leaders were externed or forced to leave the area under threats of externment. After an ignoble and staggering existence for two and a half months following the declaration of war, the Bardoloi Government submitted its resignation on 15 November, and Saadulla formed his third ministry on 17 November, as stated before. The Mukerji Report, submitted on 25 November and published on 3 December, validated the official policy of a total surrender to the company. It found the strike to be unjust. The registration of the Union was cancelled on 10 January 1940 on technical grounds. Thus ended the heroic struggle of the oil workers that shook Assam for many months.

The Spirit of Digboi Spreads

Short-lived strikes in tea gardens and “a good deal of trouble” among railwaymen and contractors’ labour, working for the British-owned Assam Railways and Trading Company, took place in 1938-39.⁶¹ This company owned an industrial complex comprising the Dibru-Sadiya Railways, several collieries, saw mills, some shares in Digboi Oil and four tea gardens in and around the towns of Margherita and Ledo. Benoybhusan Chakrabarty (1897-1967), a tea garden doctor who had resigned his job, Kedarnath Goswami and Nilmoni Barthakur—these Congressmen with sympathies for socialist and communist ideology—helped the workers to organise. The A.R.T. and Co. Workers’ Union was registered on 29 March 1939. A few days after the oil strike was launched, it reportedly called for a general strike in the Company’s establishments. The strike

60. A typed copy of the appeal in *APCC papers*, File No. 4, Packet-6, n. 1.

61. *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1938-39, p. i.

spread even beyond and spontaneously involved as many as 21 tea gardens by 23 May. Workers of the Ledo T.E. organised a march towards Tinsukia, protesting against alleged stoppage of water supply by the Company.⁶²

The situation was so pressing that the Indian Tea Association had to set up, for the first time, a definite procedure and emergency committees to meet the challenge of the strike wave. The procedure adopted involved three successive measures: (a) enquiry into the labour grievances, (b) declaration of a lock-out if the strike was found unjustified and (c) a publicity offensive against such strikes.⁶³ Several plantation labour unions—some or all of them perhaps paper unions—sprang up in the Brahmaputra Valley, while there was a lone one in the Surma Valley. These are listed below.

PLANTATION LABOUR UNIONS : 1939-40

Name	Headquarters	Date of Registration
Upper Assam Tea Co. Labour Union	Dibrugarh	27 April 1939
Rajmai Tea Co. Labour Union	„	„
Greenwood Tea Co. Labour Union	„	6 May 1939
Makum (Assam) Tea Co. Labour Union	Margherita	30 May 1939
Sylhet-Cachar Cha-Bagan Mazdoor Union		27 April 1939

Source: Govt.'s Reply to A.K. Chanda, 14 Nov., *ALAP* (1940), p. 1313.

Although far removed from the epicentre of the labour revolt, Surma Valley plantations also did not lag behind. In the year preceding 30 September 1938, there were three tea garden strikes in Sylhet,

62. Sanat Kumar Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry* (AITUC, Bombay, 1954), pp. 114-5; *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1939-40, p. i; Bardoloi's reply to debate, 6 May, *ALCP* (1939), p. 198; 10 August, *ibid.*, pp. 323-30; Govt.'s reply to A. K. Chanda, 14 Nov. *ALAP* (1940), p. 1313.

63. Griffiths, n. 52, p. 384.

each of one-day duration. In that year five tea gardens of Cachar were also on strike, involving some two thousand workers and a loss of 6,326 man-days.⁶⁴ The Sylhet-Cachar *Cha Mazdoor Sangathak* Committee was formed in 1938, at the initiative of Barin Datta, Prabudhananda Kar and others. In the 1938 Cachar strikes, this Committee circulated a large number of leaflets among the workers. Renamed Sylhet-Cachar *Cha-Bagan Mazdoor* Union, it was registered under the Trade Union Act on 27 April 1939.⁶⁵ With A.K. Chanda as its president and Sanatkumar Ahir as vice-president, the Union had a membership of about 900 in two circles of Cachar. They paid an annual membership fee of two annas per head. The Rege Committee (1946) noted that during the war years the Union had to carry on its activities in the plantations stealthily, because of a lack of freedom of movement.⁶⁶ Under the circumstances, it became practically defunct.

A wave of strikes broke out in Cachar in the wake of the Digboi struggle. The most significant of them was the strike in the Arunabund T.E. that commenced in early April 1939 and continued for forty days. The main grievances of the workers were heavy workload, ill-treatment by the management and a lack of freedom of movement in plantations. This well-organised strike was able to mobilise popular support, like that of Digboi, from almost every walk of life.⁶⁷

As the labour situation in plantations of both the Valleys was going out of hands, the Bardoloi Government set up the Tea Garden Labour Unrest Enquiry Committee on 23 May 1939, for a probe.

64. A.K. Das to A. K. Chanda on 12 Sept., *ALAP* (1938), pp. 420-3; *Annual Report on the Working of Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act (XXII of 1932) for the Year Ending 30 September 1938*.

65. Bose, n. 62, p. 114.

The House was told that leaflets were distributed by the Sylhet-Cachar Tea Garden Labour Association. Das to Chanda, n. 64. Thus there is some confusion over the name of the organisation.

66. Labour Investigation Committee (Chairman : D. V. Rege, Govt. of India), *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India* (Delhi, 1946) p. 71.

A bill entitled "Assam Tea Garden Labourers' Freedom of Movement Bill" was tabled by O. K. Das in 1937, and again in 1938, in the Assembly. But as the representatives of the industry assured the Congress Ministry that they would see to it that the supposed grievances did not exist, the bill was withdrawn. *Assam Ad.Rep.*, 1938-39, p. ii. The grievances were indeed very much real, and they persisted.

It was only after independence that rules were framed under the plantation code to guarantee freedom of movement in plantations.

67. Bose, n. 62, p. 115-7; *Amritabazar Patrika* (Calcutta), 23 April 1939 and 29 May 1939; *Naya Duniya* (In Bengali, Sylhet), 9 Jaistha, 1346 (May 1939).

The committee consisted of F.W. Hockenhull, Baidyanath Mukherjee, A. K. Chanda, Debeswar Sarma and a retired high court justice. The Government warned that strikes, lock-outs and such other activities were unwelcome and that it would not hesitate to enforce mutual forbearance, if necessary. Due to the Congress party's persuasion and an official assurance, the strike was indiscreetly called off, when the committee visited the Arunabund T. E. The twelve militant workers, who had been turned out of the tea garden along with their families, were not taken back. The Indian Tea Association decided on 1 July 1939 not to cooperate with the committee any longer. Accordingly, Hockenhull withdrew from it, and the committee became totally defunct⁶⁸.

Another notable strike took place in the Allenpur T.E. of Cachar. On 30 July 1940, about 200 working women there spontaneously went on a strike demanding higher wages and a decrease in workload. By 3 August the entire labour force of the garden struck work at the instance of the Union. A 200-strong procession of strikers proceeded to Silchar. Several organisers, including Gopendranath Ray, were arrested. All strikers thereafter returned to work on 8 August. Digen Das Gupta, another communist organiser of the Union, was prevented under Section 107, CrPC, when he tried to organise labour strikes in Shamsernagar and other tea estates in Maulvi-bazar subdivision. In 1940 the Surma Valley Dock *Mazdoor* Union was active in organising the *Khalasis* at Chhatak and Fenchuganj steamer stations in Sylhet. Some of the Sylhet communists were also working in the Bengal and Assam Railroad Workers' Union.⁶⁹ The Surma Valley (Shillong) Motor Workers' Union, with its headquarters at Sylhet, was registered on 6 May 1939. Besides, there was the Sylhet Scavenger's Union, with Kaliprasanna Das as its secretary in 1940.⁷⁰

The phase of labour struggles during the years 1937-40 was a turning point in Assam's history in more than one respect. From the very beginning, these struggles, directed against British capital, had a clear anti-imperialist character as well as a broad left-nationalist orientation. They inspired not only the anti-imperialist student

68. Same as n. 67; also, *ALCP* (1939), pp. 323-30; Griffiths, n. 52, p. 384.

69. "Report of the political situation in Assam dated 26 August 1940 by J. C. Dutta, Deputy Central Intelligence Officer, Shillong", File No. A-8(8A)—40, Police Dept. Special Branch, Govt. of Assam; *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, p. 241.

70. *ALAP* (1940), p. 1313; *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, pp. 179-82.

masses of both the Valleys, but also the people on the cool heights of Shillong. In September 1937, a partial strike appears to have occurred in the Commercial Carrying Company's workshop in Shillong. At the initiative of Kirtibhusan Chaudhury, the Shillong Municipal Workers' Union was formed and registered on 10 August 1939. The municipal workers' strike, organised about this time, was widely sympathised by the local students. The Assam Government Press Industrial Association was registered on 7 August 1939. In 1940 it led a strike battle of the Government press workers. Two other trade unions formed in Shillong were the Shillong Drivers' and Mechanics' Association, registered on 5 December 1938, and the Assam Provincial Shop Employees' Union, registered on 13 July 1940.⁷¹

The number of strike-affected tea gardens all over the province increased from 13 in 1937 to 17 in 1938 and 35 in 1939. Police forces had to be rushed to 19 out of these 65 strike-affected tea gardens. Lakhimpur and Cachar were the districts most affected. As a sequel to the labour upheaval, as many as 106 labourers in 12 tea gardens were victimised in the form of discharge, dismissal or forced repatriation during the period from November 1938 to October 1939, as per official admission. As a result of fifteen work stoppages of industrial nature, involving twenty thousand workers in 1939, as many as 13,46,740 man-days were lost.⁷² The growing power of militant

71. Question from Karunasindhu Ray, 5 March *ALAP* (1938), p. 887; Prafulla Misra, "Communist movement in Assam", *North Eastern Affairs* (Shillong) July-Sept. 1972, p. 36; *ALAP* (1940), p. 241.

72. These figures are from a Govt. statement in reply to A. K. Chanda, 21 March, *ALAP* (1940), pp. 1061-3 and the *Indian Labour Year Book 1947-48* (Govt. of India), p. 118.

According to another set of official figures, the number of strikes in Assam plantations was as follows :

Plantation Strikes in Assam : 1937-41

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of strikes</i>	<i>No. of Workers Involved</i>
1937	10	3,700
1938	7	3,700
1939	37	not given
1940	17	
1941	7	

Source : Rege Committee Report, n. 66, p. 72.

The Indian Labour Year Book 1947-48 records only 15 'industrial work-stoppages' for 1939, each involving ten or more workers. Obviously these relate to industrial workers alone.

trade unionism was demonstrated when Sanatkumar Ahir, a tea factory mechanic and communist sympathiser, won the by-election for the Silichar Labour seat as a Congress candidate in 1940. He secured 3,165 votes as against 1,227 by his rival, set up by the British planters.⁷³ Students and youth were deeply impressed by the working class awakening against the exploitation of British capital. No less were the peasants.

Unrest among Peasantry

It was noted in chapter five that the rural Assam, caught between the price slump and a fixed land revenue burden, was seething in discontent. The strife between the peasantry as a whole and the colonial regime persisted during the years 1937-40. In several places, there was confrontation even between landlords and the toiling peasants.

The demand for tenancy legislation in Sylhet was voiced by Karunasindhu Ray, a Congress candidate from Sunamganj, in his 1937 election battle. He and Bhasani separately introduced two tenancy bills in the Assembly for Sylhet and Goalpara, respectively. They held the view that the abolition of permanent settlement was desirable and that, even short of this extreme step, substantial relief could be given to the oppressed tenants by introducing some of the salutary changes brought about in Bengal through tenancy legislation. Even before their consideration by the Assembly, these bills had to be referred to the Governor General in Council for a clearance.⁷⁴ The initial constitutional hurdles having been overcome, the proposed Tenancy (Amendment) bills for Sylhet and Goalpara were substantially modified at the official initiative and passed as official bills in 1943. The two private bills, as usual, lapsed.

Meanwhile, an organised *Kisan* movement raised its head in the Sunamganj, Sadar and Karimganj subdivisions of Sylhet. The number of *Kisan Sabhas* in Sylhet went on increasing during the years

73. D. K. Borooah, asst. secy. of APCC to President, Indian National Congress, 14 July 1940, *APCC papers*, File No. 5, Packet-6, n. 1. Ahir's communist identity, though not mentioned by Borooah, was widely known.

74. File No. 4. 32/22/38—G 1938, Reforms Dept., General (B) Branch, NAI. The Sylhet Tenancy (Amendment) Bill became the rallying point of a massive peasant movement all over the district. The draft bill was printed and circulated in thousands of copies. In many areas the peasants themselves took initiative in implementing some of the amendments, without waiting for their legitimization. Ajay Bhattacharya, *Nankar Vidroha*, Vol. 1 (In Bengali, Dacca, 1973), pp. 104-29.

1937-40. By 1938 tenants succeeded in winning their immediate demand for the suspension of zamindari rent collection in one case and remissions in another. In 1938-39 there was a considerable tension between landlords and tenants in Karimganj subdivision. The third annual session of the Surma Valley *Krishak* Conference was held at Maulvibazar in March 1939, with Abul Hayat in the chair. The Karimganj Subdivisional *Krishak* Conference was held at Tegheria (Baraigram) on 28-29 May 1939, under the leadership of Sureshchandra Deb, then a leftist Congressman. In the early months of 1939, the landlord-tenant conflict rose to such a height in Gauripur, Bhatipara and Selbores estates of Sunamganj that the Government had to rush a party of armed police there to maintain peace.⁷⁵

About this time, a communist-led peasant march to Shillong to present a memorandum of demands to the Government created much sensation.⁷⁶ In connection with the agrarian trouble, a large number of participants were arrested and convicted under the Defence of India Rules by November 1940. Of fifteen Congressmen so arrested, at least nine appeared to be communists. Jagneswar Das and Jitendrakumar Bhattacharya were amongst them. Besides, twenty one Muslim peasants were also convicted.⁷⁷

While the landlord-tenant conflict dominated peasant agitations in Sylhet, it was the conflict between the State and the peasantry as a whole that moved the peasant masses of the Brahmaputra Valley. There the cry for a 50 per cent reduction in land revenue emerged as a universal demand, echoed and re-echoed in hundreds of Congress meetings and Ryot *Sabhas* till the advent of World War II. Attempts by Congress Socialists (communists inclusive) to form *Kisan Sabhas* on a class basis were, on the other hand, not many. A

75. *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1937-38, p. i; *Assam Ad. Rep.*, 1938-39, p. i; *IAR* (Jan-June 1938), p. 354; the life-sketch of Karunasindhu Ray in *People's Age*, 30 Dec. 1945; "No. 1203: Notes on the political activities of Sureshchandra Deb—" File No. C-319/1942, Confidential B, 1942, (AS). Also Bhattacharya, n. 74, pp. 104-29 for details. Also *Naya Duniya*, 13 March 1939.
76. Misra, n. 71, p. 27; "Notes on left movement and growth of CPI in Surma Valley and Jyotirmay Nandy's comments dated 12-11-72"—private file with Chinmohan Sheanavis, Calcutta; Written testimony of Sibendranath Dam Roy, dated Shillong 7 August 1972.
77. *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, pp. 179-82; Saadulla's reply to Karunasindhu, 23 Nov. *ALAP* (1940), pp. 1717-9. In 1938-39, Muslim *Nankars* (serfs) of several villages revolted against their Muslim zamindars, with the support of the *Kisan Sabhas*. They were led by Taqbir Ali, Md. Bedar Bakht, Abbas Ali Pattadar, Seikh Azahar Ali and others. See Bhattacharya, n. 74, pp. 120 and 129.

Halova *Sanghu* (tillers' union) was formed at Golaghat by local rank-and-file Congressmen. Its name was changed in 1938 to the Golaghat *Krishak Sabha*, at the initiative of Jadunath Saikia, who had come under Congress-Socialist and communist influence while studying at Banaras. Under its auspices, the third session of the Golaghat District *Krishak Sammilan* was held at Kamargaon on 14 October 1939. The conference called upon the peasants to assemble under the Congress banner and demanded a 50 per cent reduction in land revenue dues. Beside Saikia, Khageswar Tamuli and Dhirendrachandra Datta were the other early Congress Socialists who tried to radicalise this platform.⁷⁸ Devkanta Borooah (b. 1914) of Nowgong, who had his early initiation to Congress socialism at Banaras, wielded some influence as an assistant secretary to the APCC and secretary to the provincial *Rastrabhusa Prachar Samiti*, 1938-41.

Peasant conferences were not new in Goalpara subdivision. A *Krishak Sammilan* was formed there as an allied body of the local Congress in 1935. On 29 November 1937, an organisation styled '*Nikhil Goalpara Krishak Samiti*' presented an address to Jawaharlal Nehru at Goalpara to draw his attention to such local problems as the paucity of primary schools, bad drinking water and a deficient tenancy legislation. The *Samiti* claimed to have a membership of one lac, spread over several local branches—an obviously exaggerated claim!⁷⁹ Thereafter, *Kisan Sabhas* with a new ideology struck their roots there under the leadership of Pabitra Ray (an ex-ternee from Bengal), Jaladindu Sarkar and others. Swami Sahajananda Saraswati presided over a *Kisan* conference at Goalpara in the latter part of 1938.⁸⁰ The fourth annual session of the *Nikhil Goalpara Krishak Samiti* was held on 21-22 February 1939 with Hemchandra Baruah, APCC President, in the chair.

At Bhasani's initiative, the Goalpara District *Pruja* Conference was held in December 1940 at Ghagmari, with Nazi Ahmed Chaudhury in the chair. It condemned the action of those legislators who were opposed to the Goalpara Tenancy (Amendment) Bill in the Assembly. Resolutions were passed by the conference demanding

78. CPI, Assam State Council, *Silver Jubilee Souvenir* (In Assamese, May 1969, Gauhati), p. 3; *Assam Tribune*, 27 October 1939.

79. An anonymous note on Goalpara in the office of OEHFM, Gauhati; *APCC papers*—Packet 35, n. 1.

80. Swami Sahajananda Saraswati, *Mera Jivan Sangharsha* (In Hindi, Patna, 1952), p. 539.

for (i) reduction of rent in Bijni and Mechpara estates, (ii) suitable rules for effective debt conciliation boards, (iii) extension of primary education in Goalpara and (iv) use of Bengali as the medium of instruction for Bengali children of the Brahmaputra Valley in all primary and secondary schools.⁸¹

Peasant agitation was organised in some places of the Brahmaputra Valley by the underground Communist League. The Assam Peasant and Labour Party (*Krishak-Banuva Panchayat*) was formed as its open platform at a meeting of delegates from several districts, held at Gauhati on 2 May 1940. Kedarnath Goswami, a journalist and disillusioned Congressman, presided over this meeting. Earlier he had been elected president of the Dibrugarh District Peasant and Labour Party.⁸²

BIRTH OF A NEW IDEOLOGY AND LEFT NATIONALISM

Growth of Left Parties

By the time the war broke out, the workers and peasants of Assam were thus building up their class organisations. In contrast to the sweep of the working class struggles, militant peasant struggles and organised *Kisan Sabhas* were of course not many. Their combined impact nevertheless was significant. Socialist and communist thoughts that gripped the youth and the student intelligentsia in both the Valleys bore relevance to the experiences of toilers all around them. There was also an increasing awareness even among nationalists that the demand for national freedom had to be concretely linked with workers' and peasants' aspirations. Since 1938 Subhas Chandra Bose was advocating an uncompromising struggle against imperialism with methods more effective than what Gandhiji had prescribed. In course of his visits to Assam in 1938 and 1939, he gained popularity in the local Congress circles. It was in the context of these developments that several left parties—the Congress Socialist Party, Communist Party, Communist League and Forward Bloc

81. *Assam Tribune*, 17 Jan. 1941.

82. *Ibid.*, 10 May 1940. Goswami was the president of the Dibrugarh DCC in 1938 and the editor of the *Times of Assam* (Dibrugarh weekly) during 1930-39.

The Communist League—a splinter group of the CPI—was later renamed after its parent body and remained so until it was finally designated as the Revolutionary Communist Party of India in 1943.

—emerged on the soil of Assam. Their early formations are briefly described below.

Banned during the years 1934—July 1942, the Communist Party of India carried on its underground activities under the cover of mass organisations. It viewed the Congress as a national front of all anti-imperialist forces and was keen on using its platform. It stood for a socialist unity within the Congress and constituted the mainstay of the Congress-Socialist Party, formed in 1934. The Communist League, also formed in the same year by Saumyendranath Tagore of Bengal, was a recalcitrant offshoot of the CPI. It viewed the Congress as a *bourgeois* party and believed in organising the toiling masses for socialism and national freedom, on an independent political platform outside it.⁸³ All these left parties made their belated but simultaneous appearance in the Brahmaputra Valley after 1937. In the Surma Valley, the communist and socialist ideology appeared a little earlier, but the Communist League was totally absent there. Founded in 1939, the Forward Bloc struck its roots in a few districts of Assam during the early war years.

By 1938 Congress-Socialist Party groups were functioning in several subdivisions, such as Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Sylhet and Goalpara. Jadunath Saikia and Dhirendrachandra Datta of Golaghat, Benoybhusan Chakrabarty and Nilmoni Barthakur of Dibrugarh, Pabitra Ray of Bengal, then residing in Goalpara, and Sriman Prafulla Goswami (b. 1911), a student and youth leader of Gauhati—they all conferred together and decided to take steps towards forming the Assam Congress-Socialist Party.⁸⁴ “At present four districts are organised and there are four Congress-Socialist Parties, but”, wrote Goswami to Jayaprakash Narayan on 18 January 1939, “we must make a provincial party in Assam”.⁸⁵

83. Tagore had a first-hand experience of the international communist movement during his few years' stay in the Soviet Union and Europe as an insider. He was a critic of Stalin's leadership and the role of the Third International. He was also critical of Leo Trotsky's views.

84. Misra, n. 71, p. 26. Biswanath Mukherjee, while on an Assam tour on behalf of AISF in 1938, had established contacts with them and suggested such a move.

85. Goswami to Jayaprakash, Jorhat, 18 Jan. 1939, copy of intercepted letter in Secret Memo No. 876 S. N., File No. B—2 (17) 39, Police Dept., Govt. of Assam, Shillong. Also a file of private papers of Sriman Prafulla Goswami, containing exact proceedings of the Assam CSP, 1939.

In an interview at New Delhi, Goswami made it clear that the Assam CSP units followed the national front policy of the communists from the very outset and, hence, did not accept Jayaprakash's leadership. Nor were they affiliated to his party's All-India centre.

The anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution of Russia was observed in the form of a public meeting at Golaghat on 7 November 1939—an unprecedented event for the Brahmaputra Valley. A provincial (Brahmaputra Valley) conference of Congress Socialists was held at Missamara near Golaghat on 29–31 January 1940, under the presidency of Somnath Lahiri of Calcutta. Two prominent communist student leaders—Biswanath Mukherjee and Amiya Dasgupta—also attended it. There the Assam Congress Socialist Party was formed with Sriman Prafulla Goswami as the general secretary and a 21-member executive committee. On the same night, a more exclusive inner group was formed with Benoybhusan Chakravarty, Dhirendrachandra Datta, Pabitra Ray, Nilmoni Barthakur, Bishnu Bora and Jadunath Saikia to carry on secret communist activities. Later Jagannath Bhattacharyya was also taken into the group. On 20 April 1940, the executive committee of the Assam CSP held its first meeting at the house of Sibal Pandit at Lumding.⁸⁶ By a resolution, it disapproved of individual *satyagraha* as a form of struggle, but nevertheless decided to join it for the sake of discipline within Congress. Soon its impact was felt on Assam politics, mainly through the radicalisation of student masses.⁸⁷

The Assam *Chhatra Sanmilan*, the platform of a united student movement since 1916, decided in its annual conference at Jorhat in 1939 to affiliate itself to the All India Students' Federation, founded in 1936. Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya (b. 1915) was elected its general secretary and Dadhi Mahanta the editor of its organ—*Milan*. Amiya Dasgupta, the AISF leader, remained in Assam for purposes of organisation until he was expelled from the province in June 1940. He had been deputed by the Bengal Committee of the CPI to organise a communist group in the Brahmaputra Valley under the cover of the CSP. He helped radicalisation of the Students' Federation and formation of Marxist study circles in several towns of the Brahmaputra Valley.⁸⁸ A Marxist youth study club styled "Progressive Union" was established at Gauhati about 1939. In August 1940, a police intelligence report noted that communist literature was being circulated amongst students and youth by "a branch of

86. Misra, n. 71, p. 26. Interview with Dadhi Mahanta on 7 Oct. 1975 at Calcutta. Mahanta was a participant in the conference.

87. "Notes on the political activities of Bistoo Bora", n. 92 private papers of Goswami, n. 85.

88. Misra, n. 71, p. 26 and the interview with Amiya Dasgupta.

Communist Party" formed at Dibrugarh. Steps were being considered to restrain the activities of Nilmoni Barthakur and other suspected communists there.⁸⁹

In Sylhet a regular group of the Communist party, constituted of Chittaranjan Das, Barin Datta, Digen Dasgupta and others, was functioning since 1938. Praneshchandra Biswas and Jyotirmoy Nandy, who had become communists in Calcutta, came back to Sylhet in that year. The latter edited *Naya Duniya*—the local organ of the communists. The seventh session of the Surma Valley Students' Conference, which was held at Habiganj in December 1939, bore the imprint of the growing influence of communist ideology and organisation. The Surma Valley District Committee, CPI, was reportedly formed in an underground conference held at Dhaka-Dakshin in December 1940. It was in that year that Biresh Misra, the district Congress secretary of several years' standing, secretly joined the CPI.⁹⁰ Achintyakumar Bhattacharya of Cachar joined it in 1939. He was elected secretary of the Cachar District Congress Committee in 1940.⁹¹

Throughout the year 1939, the organised students all over Assam had expressed their solidarity with the Digboi workers. A joint conference of the Students' Federation bodies of both the Valleys, as well as of Manipur and the Hills, was held at Shillong in the middle of 1940 with Humayun Kabir in the Chair. The conference elected Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya as president and Praneshchandra Biswas as secretary of the emergent confederation. The conference passed resolutions condemning the Defence of India Rules and directing students not to render any assistance to war efforts. Biswas and Anjali Das, and later Bishnu Bora, went out on an organisational tour of Assam districts, carrying on anti-war propaganda.⁹² About the Students' Federation activities in Jorhat, Bora reported to Amiya Dasgupta in November 1940:

89. "Report of the political situation...", n. 69.

90. Written testimony of Praneshchandra Biswas, dated Shillong, 12 June 1973 (also interviewed on 2 August 1973 at Shillong); "No. 1179 : Notes on the political activities of Praneshchandra Biswas...", File No. C-319/1942 Confidential B, 1942, (AS). Also, the life-sketch of Biresh Misra in *People's Age*, 30 Dec. 1945.

In June 1940 Government demanded a security of Rs. 1,000/- from *Naya Duniya*, for publishing an objectionable article—"Council, Assembly and the Kisan Movement". *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, pp. 191-2.

91. Interview with Achintyakumar Bhattacharyya on 1 July 1973 at Gauhati.

92. "No. 1179 : Notes on...Biswas" and his written testimony, n. 90; Misra, n. 71, p. 29; File No. A-8 (8A)—40 : "Notes on the political activities of Bis-
too Bora", Police Dept. Special Branch, Govt. of Assam, Shillong.

"In Jorhat there are 4 study circles, 16 night schools, 27 primary committees and 13 libraries. After J. B. College students' strike we are able to get many active student workers not only in colleges but in high schools also. After your departure I attended no less than 150 meetings and tried my best to clear out (Sic.) about war, national struggle and students' duty. Now there are many who support our party. This year we enrolled 500 members (S.F.) in Jorhat".⁹³

Yet another batch of youngmen, committed to the Communist League, were also indoctrinating and organising since 1939 students with the same anti-war message, but on a different platform. It was in November 1938 that Saumyendranath Tagore, the founder of the League, had visited Gauhati and met a group of student youth, associated with the Gauhati *Vyayam Sangha* (established about 1935). Already disillusioned with the Congress leadership, they were much impressed by Tagore's independent left platform, international experience and Marxism he talked of in the context of the Digboi strike and the general unrest. The group started working for consolidation of all the left forces and invited Bose, the founder of the Forward Bloc, to pay a visit to Assam.

In a representative provincial youth conference, presided over by Bose at Gauhati, the All Assam Progressive Youth Association was formed on 6 October 1939. Its 15-member working committee, drawn from both the Valleys and diverse left groups, included *inter alia* Debendranath Sarma (president), Upendranath Sarma (general secretary), Khagen Barbarua, Haridas Deka, Nalinikumar Gupta and Kirtibhusan Chaudhury. A Left Consolidation (organising) Committee was also formed in the same conference.⁹⁴ However, both the Youth Association and the Left Consolidation Committee became defunct soon after Bose's departure.

The Gauhati *Vyayam Sangha* group, which had organised the conference, could not be drawn by Bose towards the Forward Bloc. Led by Haren Kalita, they joined the Communist League instead. An underground organising committee of the League and an open Marxist youth study club, styled 'Radical Institute', meanwhile had

93. Extract from intercepted letter, Bora to Dasgupta, quoted in the "Notes on the political activities of Bistoo Bora", n. 92. Refers to Student's Federation.

94. Confidential D. O. No.—1424-C, Supdt. of Police, Kamrup to the I.G.P., dated Gauhati 3 Nov. 1939; File No. B—2 (17) 39, Police Dept., Govt. of Assam; *Assam Tribune*, 13 Oct. 1939.

come into existence at Gauhati.⁹⁵ The Progressive Union and the Radical Institute, between them, played a significant role in drawing the cream of Assamese students towards Marxism and the broad front of "left" nationalism.

Leftist Impact on Congress

Since 1937 the Congress went on expanding and improving its organisation. In the years following the Civil Disobedience movement, its organisation had fallen into disarray. Its membership in the Brahmaputra Valley had come down to 2,620 only in 1935-36. However, by September 1937 it increased to 15,646.⁹⁶ The organisational weakness of the Congress shocked Nehru when he visited Assam in November 1937. He found that one district Congress Committee was itself a primary body and consisted of only sixty members. "The basis of your organisation will inevitably be the peasantry and therefore", he advised the APCC, "you should keep the agrarian reforms ever before you and discuss this with the peasantry". He advised the Congress legislators to organise primary Congress Committees in their constituencies and ventilate grievances of plantation workers.⁹⁷ In November 1938 the APCC reported that nearly 300 primary committees had been formed, and that the Congress activities had been extended to Shillong. The Congress membership in the Brahmaputra Valley shot up thereafter to 37,321 in 1938-39, partly as a result of the party's coming to power in the province. The membership remained between fifty six and fifty seven thousands during the next two years. Of all the Congress districts in the Valley, the most organised was Sibsagar. In 1939 it had 12,619 primary members and 99 primary committees.⁹⁸

In 1936 Sylhet had 2,831 Congress members and 15 primary committees; and Cachar, 516 members and 3 primary committees. During the preceding thirteen years, according to the Sylhet DCC's

95. Interview with Haridas Deka, 27 Feb. 1974, Gauhati.

96. "APCC Gen. Secy's Report, 1937", *APCC papers*, File No. 5, Packet-6, n.1.

97. Nehru to B. R. Medhi, APCC President, camp—Jorhat, 1 Dec. 1937, *AICC Files*, File No. p4 : 1937: 39, NMML; A copy of the 6-page typed letter was also found in *APCC papers*, File No.—nil, Packet-6, n. 1.

98. *Assam Tribune*, 8 Dec. 1939; Secret No. 37/Cong./40 Intelligence Bureau, Home, dated Simla, 24 May, 1941 in Home: Poll (I) File No. 4/6/41, NAI. According to the latter source, primary membership claimed by the APCC was 37,321 in 1938-39; 56,633 in 1939-40 and 56,000 in 1940-41. The comparable figures claimed by the PCC of Bengal were 4,83,158, 4,40,729 and 2,18,878, respectively. In Assam a large number of members were allegedly enlisted without realisation of the membership fees—a measure of organisational weakness.

own admission, the constructive programme on Khadi and untouchability had failed to create any enthusiasm in the district.⁹⁹ Factionalism persisted there, dividing the Congress into two rival groups. Later, these groups identified themselves with the right and left trends. Organisationally under the Bengal PCC, the Sylhet DCC was dominated by radical nationalists since 1937. The rightist group included, among others, B. N. Chaudhury, B. K. Das and Shibendrachandra Biswas. A 1937 by-election made the rift wide open. R. N. Aditya, a rightist election candidate, applied to the AICC Parliamentary Board for the Congress ticket through the BPCC, and Bireshchandra Misra through the APCC. Misra was nominated. But only eight days before the poll, the Board reversed its decision under pressure from the rightists. Misra was persuaded by his patron, Jawaharlal Nehru, to step down and, since it was too late for a formal withdrawal, also to issue an appeal to his electorate to vote for Aditya. The left forces refused to reconcile themselves to this position and continued their campaign for Misra. The result was that Aditya was elected only with a narrow margin of 240 votes. When Nehru came to Sylhet in the first week of December 1937, two rival reception committees were there to welcome him. The rightist leadership of the BPCC failed to discipline the Sylhet DCC, even by removing its leftist secretary, Abalakanta Gupta Chaudhury (b. 1897). For, Biresh Misra who replaced him was no less a leftist.¹⁰⁰

The Cachar DCC was also dominated by the leftists headed by A. K. Chanda, the deputy leader of the Assam Congress Legislature Party. While the APCC had no right-left rivalry within its organisation, Chanda's strong advocacy of the labour cause kept the

99. DCC's replies to items 1/1 and 1/5 of the questionnaire, 'Report of Congress and Mass Contact Sub-Committee, BPCC', enclosed in 'BPCC to Congress Mass Contact Committee', *RPC IX/36/31*, cited by John Gallagher, *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870 to 1940* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 315-7.

100. Letter from Sylhet DCC to Nehru, 29 Nov. 1937 in File No. p. 4 (i)-37 (Assam Tour Files), *AICC Files*, NMML; "Notes on the left movement..." n. 76; R. N. Aditya, *From the Corridors of Memory* (Calcutta, 1970), pp. 42-44. Aditya further writes that Rammanohar Lohia, Secy. of the Foreign Dept., AICC, criticised Sardar Patel in an article in the *Congress Socialist* for the reversal of the nomination under factional pressure from the BPCC. Patel, chairman of the Congress Parliamentary Board, took exception to this and subsequently raised this matter in the Working Committee. This episode finally resulted in the Socialist group resigning in a body from the AICC. Besides, "a very energetic group of Congress workers was lost to the Sylhet district, who slowly went over to the communist ideology".—*Ibid.*, p. 44.

Congress Legislature party under pressure. Bardoloi and his cabinet colleagues became unpopular because of their failure to intervene in workers' favour in the Digboi and Arunabund disputes. Later, when in 1940 the Saadulla Government was considering action against persons aggravating labour disputes, it was emphasised in an official communication that Chanda should be the "first person in this province to be dealt with...".¹⁰¹ Significantly, the Cachar DCC had a communist secretary from 1940 onwards till about the end of the war.

THE TANGLED NATIONAL QUESTION

'Save the Assamese Race' !

The Saadulla Ministry had an uneasy existence. Not only did it incur the displeasure of Congress but also of the Muslim League, because of its indecision on the question of abolition of the Line system. Almost all the Muslim members of the Assembly were united on this demand. Nevertheless, Saadulla was powerless to move in that direction on account of R. K. Chaudhuri's opposition inside the cabinet. Like the Congress leaders, Chaudhuri also believed that segregation was necessary to avoid conflicts between autochthones and immigrants. Munawwar Ali exposed the inconsistency of this stand in course of his speech in the Assembly on 14 August 1937. "But if the line prevents friction, then", he asked, "why do my friends of the Congress Bloc press for joint electorate"? He even drew a parallel with the segregationist practice in South Africa. He finally withdrew his resolution calling for abolition of the Line system only after the Government had agreed to accept a committee to enquire into the question.¹⁰² The Congress party allowed its members to serve on this committee.

Meanwhile the Congress high command was kept informed of the gravity of the Assam situation. "If Karachi resolutions are literally interpreted, the immigrants have every right to acquire land, property etc., and there cannot be a Line system. On the other hand", Bardoloi wrote to Rajendra Prasad in November 1937, "our people whether Congressmen or otherwise, all feel that adequate reservations must be there". He apprehended that, short of a rigid Line

101. File No.—C 314/1942, Confidential B, 1942, (AS).

102. Speeches on 5 and 14 August, *ALAP* (1937), pp. 233-4 and 712-3; R. K. Chaudhuri's speech, *ibid*, p. 714.

system, the linguistic problem would become in the coming years "a source of constant friction resulting in violence, incendiarism and crimes of all kinds..."¹⁰³

Segregationists tried to thrash out the issue with Nehru when he came to Assam in November 1937. Nilmoni Phukan and Ambikagiri Raychaudhury represented to him on behalf of the *Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha* that a "purely local and racial question" had recently been given a communal colour by the Muslim League. According to them, Bengali Muslim immigrants were willing to identify themselves with the Assamese people in matters of language and culture, but were now being persuaded and 'forced' to read Bengali. The effect of each national movement and the constitutional advance that followed in the province had been, according to them, disastrous to Assamese interests. They pointed out:

"... as a means of saving the Assamese race from extinction, a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia has even expressed their minds in favour of *the secession of Assam from India*. This is how the present situation appears to the average Assamese, and they look to you, the National Congress, to help the Assamese to get out of these dangers". (emphasis ours.)

If Sylhet and the Cachar plains were separated from the province and the mass immigration into the Brahmaputra Valley were stopped, the Assamese people would be—they said—the staunchest Congress supporters.¹⁰⁴

Aware of his limitations in understanding the local problems, Nehru was confused. The desire of the Assamese to preserve their own culture and language, and not to be overwhelmed by non-Assamese people, appeared to him perfectly legitimate. He agreed on the desirability of separating Sylhet from Assam. But, at the same time, he argued that sparsely-populated and land-rich Assam could no

103. Bardoloi to Rajendra Prasad, 13 Nov. 1937, File No. 11/37, Col. No. 5, Item No. 165, RPC, NAI.

104. Memorandum presented to Nehru at Rangiya on 28 Nov. 1937, File No. p 4 (i)—1937, *AICC Files*, NMML. Yet another memorandum was submitted on behalf of the 'Asamiya Deka Dal'. It suggested a six-point programme to save the Assamese: (i) transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, (ii) total ban on Bengali immigration to the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of twenty years, (iii) strict naturalisation laws for resident Bengali immigrants, (iv) outlawing all anti-Assamese organisations in the Brahmaputra Valley, (v) a ten-year moratorium on agricultural indebtedness and (vi) the exclusion of the planters' bloc from the legislature.

longer continue to remain so with an overcrowded province flanking it. Immigration was, therefore, bound to take place as an economic necessity. No amount of sentiment, not even laws, would stop it. "Indeed, even from the point of view of developing Assam and making it a wealthier province", he wrote to the APCC president, "immigration is desirable. The real problem is how to control and organise this immigration."¹⁰⁵ Thus, though not in favour of its total abolition, he nevertheless wanted relaxation of the Line system.

Nehru's was an idealist point of view which was neither palatable to the Assam Congress leaders, nor acceptable to all his colleagues in the all-India leadership. The proportion of Muslims in the population of the Brahmaputra Valley had increased from 9 per cent in 1881 to 19 per cent in 1931. It increased to 23 per cent by 1941 and remained the same in 1951. In 1911, Muslims constituted 0.1 per cent of the population of Barpeta subdivision; but by 1941, they constituted nearly 49 per cent. The area of land settled with immigrants from other provinces was about 1.1 million acres in 1940-41, i.e., one-fifth of the total temporarily-settled area, inclusive of wasteland grants, in the Brahmaputra Valley. East Bengal immigrants alone accounted for nearly half a million acres.¹⁰⁶

These facts were sufficient not only to unnerve many local Hindus, but also some Congress leaders of national stature. What was initially an economic issue was turned into a communal one, not only by the Muslim League, but also by some Congress leaders. Rajendra Prasad, for example, acquired a first-hand knowledge of the problem as far back as the 1920s. At that time he had toyed with the idea of populating Assam with Bihari immigrants so that Muslim influx from East Bengal could be held back. He wrote in his autobiography:

"I sounded the Assamese on the subject and they welcomed it.... Some thought it better to have the Hindus of Bihar than the Muslims of Mymensingh.... They welcomed the idea also be-

105. Nehru to Medhi, 1 Dec. 1937, *AICC Files*, n. 97.

106. Percentages are worked out from the relevant census figures. The analysis of the Barpeta population is from Saadulla's speech in the Assam Muslim League Conference at Barpeta in April 1944. *Assam Tribune*, 5 May 1944. The land settlement figures are worked out from *Assam Valley Division Land Revenue Report, 1940-41*. Inclusive of all settled lands—permanent, temporary as well as wasteland grants—the total settled area in 1940-41 amounted to 6,788 thousand acres in the Assam Valley Division. No figures are available for the amount of land settled by zamindars with immigrants in the permanent-settled portion.

cause by themselves the Assamese were unable to bring the land under the plough. But the influx of Muslims from Mymensingh was upsetting the population ratio, and the Assamese wanted to retain a majority in the Brahmaputra Valley. The influx from Mymensingh could be countered only by Bihar Hindus to settle down on the land”.

Rajendra Prasad, in partnership with his brother and Anugraha Narain Sinha, even joined a Bengali, Hindu gentleman to acquire a thousand acres of land and a tractor in a jungle-infested malarial tract. This joint venture in farming, of course, ended in a failure. Ever after this costly experience, Rajendra Prasad continued to view the successful immigration of Bengali Muslims into Assam as an unwelcome phenomenon.¹⁰⁷

Bengali-Assamese Question

Yet another dimension of the immigration problem was the burning language issue. The expatriate Bengali Hindus, who were dominant in the towns, and many of the Muslim immigrants demanded equal rights for the Bengali language. Matiur Rahman Mia (West-Goalpara) told the Assembly on 16 February 1938:

“We are Bengalees. Our mother tongue is Bengalee. ... Under the circumstances if this Assamese language be imposed as a new burden on our shoulders, on our children’s shoulders and if we are deprived of our mother tongue, then that will amount to depriving our children from opportunities of education”.¹⁰⁸

The same demand re-echoed from the Goalpara *Praja Sanmilan* at Ghagmari in December 1940. By and large, the Muslim immigrants were more concerned with acquiring land rights than preserving of their language. It was particularly so in Assam proper.

The attitude of a major section of the Bengali Hindu settlers, particularly its influential urban section, was quite different. Their leaders viewed the Brahmaputra Valley as a bilingual area. They built their case on the available census figures on Assam. S.M. Lahiri moved a resolution in the upper House on 31 August 1938, for the removal of racial discrimination in recruitment to Government jobs. Despite official opposition, his resolution recommending a revision

107. Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography* (Bombay, 1957), pp. 259-60; also see his *India Divided* (Bombay, 1946), pp. 246-8.

108. Speech in Bengali, *ALAP* (1938), pp. 66-71. Translation ours.

of the existing domicile rules—in accordance with accepted legal principles—was passed, but it was not taken up by the lower House. Therefore, on behalf of the Bengali community, a memorandum was submitted to Chief Minister Bardoloi in March 1939, drawing his attention to this resolution, as well as to the Congress Working Committee's commendable award of January 1939 on the Bengali-Bihari question. The memorandum demanded equal rights and privileges—civil and political—for all persons having their domicile in Assam, whether of origin or of choice.¹⁰⁹

The Congress Working Committee's aforesaid award had recommended abolition of the practice of issuing domicile certificates and suggested that birth in the province or ten years' continuous residence should be regarded as sufficient proof of domicile. It had also recommended educational facilities through the medium of any language, wherever there was a local demand for it. Instead of implementing these model recommendations, the Bardoloi Government opted for deliberate procrastination in this matter. While replying to S. M. Lahiri on 9 May 1939, Bardoloi promised to consider action on the memorandum, but his assurance remained unfulfilled. The third session of the Assam Domiciled and Settlers' Association (renamed Assam Citizens' Association), held at Nowgong on 24 March 1940, reiterated the demand for equal citizenship rights and education through the medium of one's mother tongue, irrespective of race and language.¹¹⁰ The conference was permeated with a spirit of challenge to the unilingual concept of the Brahmaputra Valley, as upheld by Congress since 1920.

Unpalatable as this attitude was to the Assamese people in general, it provided a grand opportunity to the Governor to pose himself as a champion of Assamese nationalism. In reply to an address presented by the Bengali Association at Nowgong, he said:

"Though I fully sympathise with you in your desire to preserve your mother tongue, I cannot—as a purely personal view—but ask two questions. First would not the possession of a common tongue tend towards the creation within Assam of a united nation? And secondly, if we accept a united nation as a desirable

109. *ALCP* (1938), pp. 72-83; for the text of the memorandum see *Assam Citizens Association* (Head Office—Dhubri, 1940), appendix A, pp. 56-66.

110. *Ibid.*, appendices B and C, pp. 66-74; *ALCP* (1939), pp. 235 and 277-8; *Assam Tribune*, 29 March 1940.

aim, could its tongue be other than Assamese? I do not think that it could".¹¹¹

The Governor was enthusiastically quoted in a speech by Nilmoni Phukan when he addressed the Assamese students of Shillong in August 1940. Phukan, who had consistently opposed the Congress till 1938, joined it towards the latter part of the year and was elected president of the Jorhat Town *Mauza* Congress Committee.¹¹² His decision to join the Congress was obviously influenced by its acceptance of office. In the economic crisis of the 1930s, the tea garden he built with borrowed funds had to be sold out to a Marwari trader. This frustration made him perhaps aware of the imperialist stranglehold on Assam's economy and salvaged him from his heretofore impeccable, collaborationist politics. Nevertheless, it could not cure him of the fear of his own countrymen.¹¹³ Together with Ambikagiri Raychaudhury, he continued his tirade against the Bengali settlers, which was quite out of tune with the popular anti-imperialist struggles of the period.

Aftermath of Hockenhull Report

In an atmosphere of growing distrust between Hindus and Muslims, as well as between the Assamese and the Bengalis, F. W. Hockenhull, the leader of the European party, had the honour of presiding over the deliberations of the Line System Committee. Its report, submitted in February 1938, emphasized that indigenous people alone would be unable, without the aid of immigrant settlers, to develop the province's enormous wasteland resources within a reasonable period. Nevertheless, it viewed the Line system favourably and even advised its tightening to protect the tribal lands.¹¹⁴ The situation was too delicate for Saadulla for taking a decision on the matter.

Even the Bardoloi Government, that followed Saadulla's, procrastinated. Only a few days before its resignation it was able to adopt a resolution on the subject, which was gazetted on 4 November 1939. Its main features were:

- (i) denial of land settlement to anybody in village and professional grazing reserves;

111. Cited by Nilmoni Phukan in a speech at the annual session of the Assam Students' Union, held at Shillong, as reported in *Assam Tribune*, 23 August 1940.

112. Ibid., also see *Assam Tribune*, 6 Oct. 1939.

113. Dilip Chaudhuri, *Nilmoni Phukanar Cintadhara* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1972), pp. 24-27 and 91.

114. *Report of the Line System Committee*, Vol. 1, (Shillong, 1938).

- (ii) regulated settlement of landless people, including immigrants on available wastelands, subject to a holding of 30 bighas per family; and
- (iii) eviction of all immigrant squatters from areas declared 'protected tribal blocks', in the submontane region.¹¹⁵

The policy on the whole reflected a reasonable approach. But since much would depend on how and by whom it was going to be implemented, it hardly satisfied anybody. The first provincial conference of the Assam Muslim League, held at Ghagmari in November 1939, rejected the Line and demanded its total abolition.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, many thought that the policy adopted was not sufficiently protective, so far as tribal peoples' interests were concerned. While speaking on the budget on 26 February 1940, Bhimbar Deuri refused to make any distinction between the policies of Saadulla and Bardoloi in this matter. He complimented "the farsighted British officers" for innovating the Line System "with a view to do even justice to all concerned", and demanded its strict implementation.¹¹⁷ In course of an editorial on 29 March 1940, the *Assam Tribune* commented that the Saadulla Government was following "a completely anti-Assamese policy" in the matter of immigration. With Bardoloi out and Saadulla in, the policy could not in practice be what it was originally intended to be.

To work out the operational details of the policy in consultation with the Opposition, Chief Minister Saadulla held an all-party conference on the Line system on 31 May and 1 June 1940. A development scheme, as envisaged in the majority report of the Hocken-hull Committee, was officially advocated there with some modifications to accommodate the minority view also. The Government Resolution that followed on 21 June put a ban on the settlement of wastelands with any immigrant entering Assam after 1 January 1938. It also decided to go ahead with a development scheme for providing land to indigenous landless persons and eligible immigrants, in an order of priorities in favour of the former.¹¹⁸

The salient features of the Development Scheme were published in the *Assam Gazette* of 4 December 1940. Under the scheme, a special

115. *Assam Tribune*, 1 Dec. 1939.

116. *ALCP* (1940), p. 103.

117. *Assam Tribune*, 28 June 1940. The minority view in the Report was presented by Sarveswar Barua, Kameswar Das and Rabichandra Kachari.

118. Harendranath Barua, "The development scheme, position of indigenous people", *Assam Tribune*, 29 August 1941.

officer was to be appointed by the Government to examine whether the proposed areas could be opened for settlement without any detriment to the districts' normal requirements of grazing and forest reserves. The settlement was to be confined to only indigenous landless people and the pre-1938 immigrants. Besides, the flood and erosion affected people, then illegally squatting in some 'lined' villages and reserves, were also to be accommodated. Eligible applicants were to receive wastelands in specified development areas, on payment of stipulated premia, in blocks segregated for different communities as before. The Government promised to put the scheme into operation as early as possible, after the land scrutiny was completed. To appease the Muslim public, an assurance was given that the Line in respect of the non-tribal and non-backward people would soon be done away with.¹¹⁹

Line or no Line, the law of competition was in full operation. Whatever feeble attempts were made to set up lines in Goalpara, for example, were found self-defeating. Local people could not be stopped there from selling their lands even in 'lined' villages to immigrants at high prices. The district being contiguous to Bengal and the bulk of the people speaking a language akin to Bengali, they could easily accommodate themselves—as was reported by the district magistrate—to the immigrants' ways of life and live in peace and amity with them.¹²⁰ But any such breakdown of the Line system in Assam proper was certain to produce more serious implications.

Assamese public opinion—the opinion among articulate Hindus to be more precise—was therefore almost hysteric in denouncing the development scheme. The Muslim League was gaining ground. It was in this atmosphere that the Congress launched its anti-war individual civil disobedience in Assam in December 1940. People could not be split on the linguistic issue. The Assam Citizens' Association failed to strike roots among the local Bengali youth. The latter allowed it to go into liquidation after one more annual conference at Gauhati. They had meanwhile turned to militant nationalism and a leftist ideology and had taken their place in the mainstream of struggle side by side with others. The Congress was evidently successful in containing the Bengali-Assamese conflict for larger political interests.

119. Goalpara district magistrate to Govt. of Assam, 1 Jan. 1938, cited in R. K. Chaudhuri's reply, 25 Feb., *ALAP* (1938), pp. 464-6.

120. *Ibid.*

War, National Struggle and Assembly Politics

THIRD SAADULLA MINISTRY

Satyagraha Against War Efforts

The third Saadulla Ministry (17 Nov. 1939-24 Dec. 1941) was born with a commitment to war efforts and to the Defence of India Rules. And as such, it was not free to act in a manner prejudicial to either. On 11 November 1940, the Assembly voted, 50 to 40, to reject an adjournment moved by the Congress to discuss an order under the Defence of India Rules, banning processions and meetings in Sylhet.¹

But Saadulla was in a fix when Delhi pressed for the revival of the long-abolished police intelligence branch. The Viceroy wrote to the Assam Governor on 21 May 1940, "...the war has created special obligations. ... I have come to the conclusion that this matter should be delayed no further". Ministers could hardly deny the necessity for such an intelligence staff. They were also aware that the Governor's special powers were not to be ordinarily and lightly invoked to relieve them of the responsibilities which precisely were theirs. Nevertheless, being afraid of public reaction they were unwilling to initiate necessary action in the legislature on their own. For a way-out, they rather willingly looked forward to the Governor's interference from above under Section 126 (5).² Such interference was of course not lacking. The Assembly was told on 3 March 1941 that the intelligence branch had been revived by the Governor, as per requirements of his special responsibilities.³

The Ministry's cooperation with war efforts was not just passive and perfunctory. At a cabinet meeting on 1 June 1940, the question

1. *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, p. 169.

2. Reforms Branch File No. 20/126/40-R 1940, GI : Reforms Dept., (NAI).

3. Robert Reid, *Years of Change in Bengal and Assam* (London, 1967), p. 137; *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, p. 170; *IAR* (Jan-June 1941), Vol. 1, p. 247.

of enabling the Assamese of all classes to join the armed forces was discussed. The proposal that an Assam Regiment be raised took a concrete shape in due course. In July the Government contributed rupees one lac to the War Fund. The relevant supplementary demand, declared out of order by the Speaker on technical grounds on 19 November, was revived in the next budget session and passed on 20 March 1941. For war efforts, even local board funds were not spared. Eleven Congress members of the Tezpur Local Board, led by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, had to resign in a body in April to record their protest against the contribution of Rs. 3000/- to the War Fund.⁴ Both Saadulla and his seniormost colleague, R. K. Chaudhuri, were associated with the National War Front, respectively as its chairman and vice-chairman. In July 1941, Saadulla even joined the National Defence Council as a representative Muslim leader.⁵

While Saadulla was thus busy helping war efforts, the Congress launched its programme of anti-war agitation. The Congress legislators stopped attending the Assembly sessions. By June 1940 the APCC Working Committee converted itself into the provincial *Satyagraha* Committee. District Congress Committees were asked to hold meetings in villages to explain the Congress programme of individual *satyagraha*, as envisaged by Gandhiji. "It is wrong to help the British war effort with men and money"—was the simple slogan to be raised by carefully selected *satyagrahis* courting arrest thereby.⁶ According to an APCC report, *satyagrahis* enrolled upto 15 June 1940 in the Brahmaputra Valley numbered 1,576—mostly villagers. The figure included eleven Muslims and fifteen women. Several training camps were opened for their orientation.⁷ All these preparations being over, the first individual *satyagraha* in Assam was offered by G.N. Bardoloi on 9 December 1940 at Gauhati.⁸

A repressive policy was already in operation since early 1940 to deal with communists and other leftists, many of whom were served

4. Ibid., *IAR* (July-Dec. 1940), Vol. 2, p. 170; Reid, n. 3, p. 137; *Assam Tribune*, 25 April 1941.
5. To fall in line with the then Muslim League policy, later he had to resign from the National Defence Council, under directives from Jinnah. Khalid B. Sayeed, *Pakistan: the Formative Phase 1857-1948* (2nd ed., New York/Karachi, 1968), pp. 183-4.
6. *IAR* (Jan-June 1940), Vol. 1, p. 247; M. Tayyebulla, *Between the Symbol and the Idol at last* (New Delhi, 1964), pp. 105-7.
7. *APCC papers*, File No. 5, Packet-6, Congress Bhavan, Gauhati; "Report of the political situation in Assam dated 26 August 1940 by J. C. Dutta, Deputy Central Intelligence Officer, Shillong", File No. A-8 (8A)—40. Police Dept. Special Branch, Govt. of Assam.
8. Tayyebulla, n. 6, p. 107.

with orders of internment and externment. Now the deliberate violation of the Defence of India Rules by the Congress *satyagrahis* added a new dimension to the law and order problem. In many cases, the authorities took no cognizance of the solo performance of the garlanded *satyagrahis*, and it ended in a great fun for the onlookers. The APCC president himself had to offer *satyagraha* twice to qualify for a jail term. G.N. Bardoloi failed to offer *satyagraha* for the second time, after his premature release from jail, much to the displeasure of the APCC president. He had, of course, obtained Gandhiji's prior approval for exemption on health grounds. But many others avoided the ritual on their own. A group of Congress Assembly members even petitioned to the APCC president for absolving them from re-offering *satyagraha*. Their plea was that the peculiar political conditions then prevailing in Assam, particularly the immigration problem, required their intervention.⁹ On the other hand, the left nationalists of all brands and communists were highly critical of the individual *satyagraha* programme. They urged for mass action instead.

The movement did nevertheless achieve its limited objective—that of making people aware of the imperialist character of the war and of their moral right to denounce it. Upto 31 May 1941, altogether 334 *satyagrahis* were arrested, of whom 231 were convicted to terms of imprisonment ranging from one day to one year. Many more went to the jails even thereafter. The *satyagraha* campaign—'both grim and light' in the words of Tayyebulla—petered out by the end of December.¹⁰ There was an increasing reluctance on the part of registered *satyagrahis* to repeat their feats.¹¹

Congress Returns to Legislature

The growing concern over Saadulla's land settlement policy was largely responsible for Congressmen's hesitancy in faithfully pursuing

9. Ibid, pp. 107-11 and 156; Gandhiji to Bardoloi, Sevagram, 3 July 1941, photostat copy in G. N. Bardoloi, *Gandhiji* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1969); Bardoloi's statement on 22 Dec. 1941, cited *IAR* (July-Dec. 1941), Vol. 2, p. 165.
10. For arrest and conviction figures, reply to K. P. Agarwala, 18 June, *ALCP* (1941), pp. 355-6; Tayyebulla, n. 6, pp. 113-4.
11. For example, Sarveswar Barua wanted to allegedly withdraw his name from the Satyagrahi list for domestic reasons. Rajanikanta Barua and Jadav Prasad Chaliha, both Assembly members and planters, expressed their inability to sign the Satyagraha pledge. "APCC Gen. Secy's report, 12 March 1942", *APCC papers*, File No. 5, Packet-6. The latter had purchased rolling mills in Calcutta and was obviously busy developing this new unit of his business enterprise.

the individual *satyagraha* programme. Many of them grudged an easy walk-over in the Assembly for Saadulla to go ahead with his Land Development Scheme. The Scheme was announced in the Government Resolution of 28 July 1941 for the district of Nowgong to begin with. Similar schemes for other districts were soon to follow. The Special Officer, appointed to draw up a scheme for the whole Brahmaputra Valley, submitted his report, but it was withheld from publication.¹² There was persistent public agitation in Nowgong since September to pressurise the Congress for renewing parliamentary activities. A public committee was formed there to urge upon the Congress high command to allow the Congress legislators to participate in the ensuing Assembly session. Even the local press recommended this course for the Congress.¹³

After his release from jail, Bardoloi visited Wardha to consult the high command on this issue. His own opinion, as he claimed, was that *satyagraha* could be made a real success only through a complete withdrawal from legislatures. However, twenty-seven out of thirty-three Congress members of the Assam Legislative Assembly were reportedly in favour of resuming parliamentary activities, at least on vital matters. He found that representatives from all quarters, particularly from the Congress-minority provinces, who had come to Wardha for consultations, had the same opinion. Most of the Congress Working Committee members also favoured resumption of parliamentary activities, whenever needed. On his return from Wardha in late November 1941, Bardoloi announced that the Congress legislators of Assam were free to attend the ensuing winter session of the Assembly and work for a no-confidence motion. "That is what the public has all along wanted them to do; the regret is that", it was editorially commented in a local weekly, "Wardha has not seen its way to allow them to continue their parliamentary activities beyond this session". However, a new orientation in Congress policy was hoped for even before the year was over.¹⁴

12. 8 Dec., *ALAP* (1941), pp. 1440 and 1444.

13. *Assam Tribune*, 17 Oct. 1941; *ibid*, 31 Oct. 1941; *ibid*, editorial, 24 Oct. 1941.

14. *Assam Tribune*, 28 Nov. 1941. G. N. Bardoloi's own statement of 22 Dec. 1941, n. 9.

The offer of *satyagraha* being purely one of personal conviction, the APCC president and his colleagues came to the conclusion that those who had not offered *satyagraha* for one reason or other should be allowed to attend the Assembly and participate in its discussion. The Parliamentary Sub-committee was accordingly moved and the permission obtained.

Students Lathi-Charged : Saadulla Out

In the Assembly session that commenced on 1 December, Lakheswar Barua moved a resolution on land settlement, incorporating an amendment by Bardoloi, to disapprove Saadulla's policy.¹⁵ This caused a flutter in the ministerial party, since R. K. Chaudhuri's conscience was not clear on this issue. Meanwhile, a new development outside the Assembly precipitated the ministerial crisis. A Cotton College student was manhandled by a prominent National War Front organiser, when students were boycotting a week-long war-fund raising scientific exhibition, in the science laboratory of their own institution. On 6 December, the students came out from their classes and organised a big procession which paraded the streets shouting—"not a man, not a pie to the imperialist war". The procession was broken up by brutal bayonet and lathi charges, involving severe injuries to a large number of students. This occasioned a province-wise continuous student strike and a wave of protest hartals. At the initiative of the All India Students' Federation, a 'Gauhati Day' was observed for anti-war demonstrations all over the country.¹⁶

Under the circumstances, secret talks were held between some Congress leaders and R. K. Chaudhuri. If a coalition ministry headed by Allah Baksh could be supported by the Congress in Sind, why not one led by Chaudhuri under Assam's special circumstances? Chaudhuri submitted his resignation from the Ministry on 9 December—in the wake of which several no-confidence motions were tabled. The Congress Assembly party held a meeting the same evening to consider the issue of support to Chaudhuri in his attempt to form a new ministry. Out of thirty one Congress legislators present in the meeting, twenty eight voted for support to Chaudhuri. O.K. Das, Krishnanath Sharma and Siddhinath Sarma were the three dissidents. B. R. Medhi and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed were still in jail. Tayyebulla, APCC president, attended the meeting on invitation. He recorded his strong opposition in view of Chaudhuri's association with the National War Front.¹⁷

A crisis developed in the relationship between the parliamentary

15. 6 Dec., *ALAP* (1941), pp. 1401-24; *Assam Tribune*, 12 Dec. 1941.

16. Same as n.15 and *Assam Tribune*, 19 Dec. 1941; also information gathered from the then student leaders—Umakanta Sharma, Nandeswar Talukdar and Tarunsen Deka; *The Golden Jubilee Volume, Cotton College* (Gauhati, 1951-52), p. 73.

17. M. Tayyebulla, *Karagarar Cithi* (Gauhati, 1962), pp. 285-94; Tayyebulla, n. 6, pp. 114-6.

and organisational wings of the Congress party over the issue of ministry-formation. A majority of the APCC Working Committee members supported Tayyebulla's stand. In the next few days, both Bardoloi and Tayyebulla were busy in keeping the high command informed of their respective appraisals of the situation. Abul Kalam Azad, the national Congress president, summoned them by turn to Calcutta for a discussion and advised them to clinch the issue at a meeting of the APCC.¹⁸

Meanwhile, on 12 December Saadulla submitted his resignation and, pending its acceptance by the Governor, made a statement to that effect in the House the very next day. Bardoloi, too, made a statement on the Gauhati lathi charge. A vote of no-confidence was moved after Saadulla and his supporters had walked out. Both the Land Development Scheme and the Gauhati lathi charge came under fire. The Assembly passed a vote of no-confidence, 56 to nil. Chaudhuri and two parliamentary secretaries voted for the motion.¹⁹

The constitutional deadlock that lingered thereafter stemmed from the Congress indecision. As per Azad's advice, the APCC Working Committee met for two days on 14-15 December at Gauhati and was apprised by both Bardoloi and Tayyebulla of their talks with Azad. The outcome of the meeting was kept a guarded secret.²⁰ Subsequently, further instructions were received from the Congress Parliamentary Sub-Committee; but these were ambiguous and vague. Bardoloi reiterated on 22 December:

"If a new Ministry is formed, the Congress Party would not oppose it so long as the Government would be carried on the basis of the Congress policy and programme excepting war measures. It is also open to such members of our Party to offer Satyagraha as would like to do so".²¹

18. The same as n. 17; also Bardoloi's statement of 22 Dec. 1941, n. 9. Since Bardoloi and Tayyebulla did not see eye to eye, their accounts have to be compared and collated to get at the facts.

19. *IAR* (July-Dec. 1941), Vol. 2, pp. 163-4; *Assam Tribune*, 19 Dec. 1941.

20. *Assam Tribune*, 19 Dec. 1941; Bardoloi's statement of 22 Dec. 1941, n. 9.

For a slightly different version of the development, see *Karagarar Cithi*, n. 17, pp. 285-94.

21. Bardoloi's statement of 22 Dec. 1941, n. 9.

Whatever instructions were received from the high command regarding support to Chaudhuri were interpreted differently by Bardoloi and Tayyebulla. According to the latter, the advice of the high command, as early as in 12 December, was clearly against lending support to any ministry. See *Karagarar Cithi*, n. 17, pp. 285-94 and Tayyebulla, n. 6, p. 115.

In any case, the proposed Chaudhuri Ministry never saw the light of the day.

SECTION 93 AND FOURTH SAADULLA MINISTRY

Asked on 18 December to form an alternative ministry, Bardoloi refused to oblige, except on terms prejudicial to war efforts. If Chaudhuri formed a new coalition cabinet instead, the Congress support would in general be given, he said, but not for supporting the war. Chaudhuri claimed to head a 26-member party in the Assembly and looked forward to the Congress support. However, under the given circumstances, the Governor's interview with him remained understandably an empty formality. Even the possibility of an all-party war cabinet minus the Congress was explored, but without success. Finally, Section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935 was proclaimed on 25 December 1941. This meant the suspension of the legislature and a take-over of the reins of administration personally by the Governor.²²

Governor's Regime and Congress Challenge

One of the first acts of the Governor's regime was the Resolution of 6 March 1942 scrapping the Land Development Scheme. It was stated that the policy of wastelands settlement, if continued further, would seriously prejudice "the interests not only of the indigenous population, but also of those who have already come from Bengal and settled in the last twenty or thirty years...". The pressing need of extending forests and preserving grazing grounds was particularly emphasized.²³ This was no doubt a calculated move to appease the Hindu and Assamese public opinion, at a critical juncture, when the war was rapidly approaching India's eastern frontier, and when all over the country the Congress was being pressed by people to throw the gauntlets to the Raj.

By mid-1942, the war situation was serious. The invading German army had penetrated deep into the Russian territory. With the fall of Singapore on 15 February, Rangoon on 7 March and the Andamans on 12 March 1942, the Japanese were almost at the doors of India. The mission of Sir Stafford Cripps for a political settlement failed in April. The rulers were nervous, but so were the ruled, though for different reasons. Many national leaders with

22. *IAR* (July-Dec. 1941), Vol. 2, p. 164; Reid, n. 3, p. 147; letter to the editor, dated 21 Dec. 1941, *Assam Tribune*, 26 Dec. 1941.

23. Communiqué cited in *Assam Tribune*, 1 Sept. 1944.

genuine sympathies for the USSR and equally genuine hatred against fascism were in a mental conflict. They would have liked to support the Allied forces against fascism. But could they do so effectively while remaining in bondage? C. Rajagopalachari even advocated a conciliatory attitude to the Muslim League demands—the stand which culminated into his virtual support to the demand for Pakistan in July 1944—to ensure a quick political settlement in order to meet the emergency. But the AICC remained firm on its stand and reiterated the principle of non-violent non-cooperation as the right means for resisting invasion from any quarters.

By its resolution of 14 July 1942, the AICC Working Committee served the Raj with an ultimatum. In a tense atmosphere, the AICC met at Bombay on 7–8 August 1942 and asked the British to quit. Its historic resolution of 8 August sanctioned the starting of a non-violent mass struggle, “on the widest possible scale”, under Gandhiji’s leadership. Once started, the struggle was to be carried forward indefinitely. In the absence of its leaders, under compelling circumstances, every participant was to act for himself or herself within the limits of the general instructions issued.²⁴ “Do or Die” was Gandhiji’s message to the people. His draft statement, containing detailed instructions for the movement, was scheduled for discussion on 9 August, but the AICC failed to take it up. No formally sanctioned programme for a controlled civil disobedience could therefore be issued.²⁴ For, on that day the Government struck. In anticipation of the AICC resolution, lists of persons to be detained were kept ready in advance in every province. The list, finalised in Assam by 7 August, included names of eleven important Congress functionaries of the Brahmaputra Valley and five of the Surma Valley.²⁵ Gandhiji and other leaders were thrown

24. Tarachand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India* Vol. 4 (New Delhi, 1972), pp. 375–7; Tayyebulla, n. 6, pp. 130–40.

25. These sixteen leaders were—M. Tayyebulla, Siddhinath Sarma, Liladhar Barua, B. R. Medhi, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, O. K. Das, Padmadhar Chaliha (1895–1969), Lakheswar Barua, Harekrishna Das, G. N. Bardoloi, Debeswar Sarma, A. K. Chanda, Kedarnath Bhattacharya, Purnendukishor Sengupta, Chanchalkumar Sarma, and Achintyakumar Bhattacharyya. The latter two, who were also members of the CPI, were later released, because of their viewing the war as a people’s war.

The arrest of O. K. Das was delayed, in consideration of his ill health and his firm faith in non-violence. The district magistrate of Darrang reported on 20 August: “When some Congressmen had broken down telephone wires, Omeo Kumar Das issued a notice announcing that such acts were against the Congress policy”.—Confidential B, File No.—C 351/1942, “Subject: Congress movement 1942—progress of the movement in Assam”, (AS).

into the gaols. Between 9 August and 15 August, all important leaders of the Assam Congress, including Tayyebulla, were arrested. While returning to Assam from the AICC meeting G. N. Bardoloi and Siddhinath Sharma, too, were arrested at Dhubri on 15 August. In blind fury, the people hit back. The months of August and September saw spontaneous mass protests and violence all over India. The Government of Assam declared the AICC and the APCC as unlawful bodies on 10 August, by its notification no. 15-H. Later the lower committees were also banned.

The detention of the Congress legislators created conditions for Saadulla's return to power on 25 August 1942. The Raj was pleased to revoke Section 93 so that the popular resistance could be confronted by a 'popular' ministry. A secret report to the Eastern Army Headquarters, Barackpore, anticipated that Saadulla "will maintain a policy compatible with the maintenance of loyalty, law and order". The expectations were not belied.²⁶

'42 *Struggle and Fourth Saadulla Ministry*

Processions and protest *hartals* were spontaneously organised by people in many places of the province. In an appraisal of the situation, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam noted on 21 August that Nowgong and 'perhaps' Darrang were more troublesome than other districts. Two platoons of the Assam Rifles were sent to Nowgong to maintain peace. By the end of August, according to a report received by the Chief Secretary, there was obviously "an atmosphere of rebellion around Nowgong and from all accounts also in the area around Kamrup and Jamunamukh" (Secret No. 3983 C. 29 August 1942). People were shot dead by the police and military at several places of Nowgong district in August.²⁷

It was mainly in Nowgong district that some serious acts of sabotage took place in the second half of August 1942. Railway tracks were displaced at least at three places there, and two paramilitary officers were assaulted at Puranigudam. Several excise shops, the

26. Secret Govt. of Assam No. 76/PS, Office of Military Liaison Officer, Confidential B, 1942, File No. C 251/1942, "Subject : Congress Movement", (AS).

27. Confidential B, File No.—C 251/1942, "Subject: Congress movement 1942—progress of the movement in Assam", n. 25.
Five freedom fighters died from gun-shots in the district of Nowgong—Hemram Patar, Gunabhi Bardoloi and Hemram Bora on 26 August 1942; Tilak Deka on 28 August and Bhogeswari Phukanni on 18 September, the same year.

Kathiatoli Inspection Bungalow and the Raha Circle Office were burnt. People turned violent also in other districts. A mail van was sacked at Goalpara and a military depot was burnt at Palasbari in Kamrup. On 28-29 August, a crowd burnt the Garrison Engineering Office, the Post and Telegraph Office and an inspection bungalow at Sarbhog in Barpeta subdivision. In Sylhet, an angry crowd destroyed records and furniture of three Government offices. In September, similar disturbances spread to Sibsagar and other districts. At Barpeta a collaborating pleader's house, a forest bungalow and several liquor shops were burnt.²⁸ There were cases of sabotage on the railways near Shahajibazar in Habiganj, at Barpathar in Golaghat, near Saffrai in Sibsagar and Rangiya in Kamrup.²⁹

There were brutal police firings at Gohpur and Dhekiajuli, both in the district of Darrang, when hundreds of unarmed people led by *satyagrahis* attempted to enter the respective police station compounds on 20 September to hoist the Congress flag there. Thirteen persons were killed at Dhekiajuli and two at Gohpur, including a 15-year old girl—Kanaklata Barua. Lathi-armed volunteers of the village defence committees, which were organised by the Saadulla Government for its support at the grass root level, helped the police in many places in suppressing the 1942 movement.³⁰ There were also cases of police firing at Patacharkuchi of Barpeta subdivision on 25 September and at Fakiragram in Goalpara subdivision in

28. Home (Pol.) File No. 18/8/42 and Fortnightly reports, Assam, August and Sept. 1942 cited by A. C. Bhuyan, *The Second World War and Indian Nationalism: A Study of the Quit India Movement* (Unpublished Ph.D thesis J.N.U. School of International Studies, New Delhi, 1972), pp. 109-10; also see Confidential B, 1943 File No.—C 243/1943, (AS) and No. 214 S Confidential B, 1942 File No.—C 351/1942 (AS).

29. K. N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (reprint, Gauhati, 1969), p. 102.

During the Quit India movement of 1942, "all attempts at sabotage caused only 6 derailments", whereas there were 33 derailments and 6 collisions since the Americans took over the Assam Railways in early 1944. It was so observed by Wavell on 22 August 1944. See P. Moon, ed., *Wavell the Viceroy's Journal* (London, 1973), p. 88.

30. Confidential B, File No.—C 351/1942 "Subject: Congress movement 1942—progress of the movement in Assam", n. 25.

The police officer who was then in charge of the police station of Dhekiajuli published his own version of the firing incident exactly thirty two years after it had taken place. See, Mahidhar Bora, "Biyallish biplavar eta aitihasik din", *Niitacal* (Assamese Weekly), 14 August 1974.

For a list of martyrs, an account of peoples' heroism and the details of police and military atrocities, see Tayyebulla, n. 6, pp. 149-54 and Dutt, n. 29, pp. 101-6 and 139-40.

October.³¹ Nidhanu Rajbansi, a poor peasant of the latter place, was brutally bayoneted to death for resisting the imposition of a collective fine.

The consolidated statistical picture of the movement, officially compiled at the end of 1943 and reproduced in page 275 throws some light on the extent and nature of the movement and the Government's punitive measures. A more telling report was later compiled by G. N. Bardoloi. Never before were so many people killed or arrested in the province either during the 1921-22 movement or in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930 and 1932. The toll of police and military atrocities in 1942 was no less than twenty-seven deaths from gunshots—all in the Brahmaputra Valley. About three thousand people were arrested. Of four death sentences passed for alleged sabotage activities, that on Kushal Konwar was confirmed by the Governor-General. He was executed on 15 June 1943 for alleged implication in the Sarupathar train derailment case. The other three co-accused were each given ten-year terms of imprisonment.³²

An Assessment of '42 Struggle

Although the movement was carried on in the name of the Congress and mainly by Congressmen, many Congress leaders like O. K. Das condemned violence and sabotage activities.³³ The all-India leadership had been arrested even before it could formally launch the movement and issue necessary instructions. Hence, it was not a Congress movement as such. People—non-Muslim masses in general—

31. The mood of the people is indicated by the report of the officer in-charge of Pathacharkuchi police station to Supdt. of Police, Gauhati :

"Mob about 1,000 Congressmen armed with lathis attacked me with two armed constables at Jalal to rescue three Congress leaders...Fired three rounds...at Rehabari again surrounded, about 500 congressmen armed with big lathis. Fired three rounds, probably killed two men. On the road to EKAYA, similarly two big mobs attacked, fired one round to sky. At NITYAMANDA surrounded, about 500 Congressmen armed with lathis, blocked road. Fired one round, probably killed one...no police party injured."

cited by R. C. R. Cumming, IGP, to Chief Secy., 26 Sept. 1942, Confidential B File No. C 248/1943 "Subject : Congress Movement 1942—progress of the movement in Assam", (AS).

32. Dutt, n. 29, pp. 101-6; Tayyebulla, n. 6, pp. 149-50; also the Table in Page 275.

33. Confidential B, File No.—C/351/42, n. 25; also, Dutt, n. 29, p. 102.

OFFICIAL STATISTICS OF CONGRESS DISTURBANCES : ASSAM

(9 August 1942—31 December 1943)

<i>Nature of Case</i>	<i>No.</i>
Police Firing Occasions	4*
Fatal Casualties	15*
Non-Fatal Casualties (Inflicted)	19
Non-Fatal Casualties (Suffered)	17
Police Stations Destroyed/Damaged	4
Govt. Buildings Destroyed/Damaged	64
Other Public Buildings „ „	66
Private Buildings „ „	61
Bomb Explosions	10
Explosives Discovered without Damage	9
Cases of Sabotage to Roads	43
Arrests Made	2,707
Case of Imposition of Collective Fine	1
Defection from Govt. Service	nil
	<i>Amount</i>
Estimated Loss to Government	Rs. 2,84,582
Estimated Loss to Other Parties	Rs. 1,94,847
Collective Fine Imposed	Rs. 3,39,487

Source: Home Pol. File No. 3/52/43, (NAI) cited by Bhuyan, n. 28, appendix—table 1 (abridged and adapted by us). This source fails to give a complete picture, because of under-reporting.

*Fatal casualties were no less than 27; the actual number of police and military firings was more than what has been indicated above. See Dutt, n. 29, appendix IV—p. 139.

spontaneously started it. The Communist League, renamed Revolutionary Communist Party since 1943, the Forward Bloc and the Congress Socialist followers of Jayaprakash Narayan—all of them plunged into the struggle. They never accepted non-violence as a creed. The leaderless Congress masses in many places of Assam

came under their influence and direction. Clandestine literature exhorting violence and sabotage activities was in circulation. Attempts were made by the underground workers to collect fire-arms. For example, six licensed guns had been stolen in Nalbari and nineteen in Nowgong.³⁴

Jail-going remained no more a soft business. Thousands were jailed or were home-interned; some were externed from the province. Many Congressmen like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Lakshmi-prasad Goswami, Sankarchandra Barua, Mahendra Hazarika,³⁵ Brajanath Sharma and Gahanchandra Goswami, went underground to sustain the movement. Attempts were made in a few rural areas to establish a sort of parallel Government, through village *panchayats* and *Shanti-senas* (soldiers of peace). But these did not appear to have attained much success. The underground resistance movement made a limited headway in Assam in terms of actual operations. But it did help sustain hope and occasional symbolic defiance. News about the Indian National Army, formed abroad, kept up their morale. Hemchandra Baruah, the ailing Congress leader, maintained contact from his sick bed with all the groups of underground freedom fighters.

There was an unprecedented concentration and movement of troops in Assam. Students and teachers of the Cotton College were pushed out from its extensive campus to make room for the armed forces during the years 1942-45. The Cotton College Students' Union Society had, since its democratisation in 1939, played a vanguard role in politicising the students. It remained virtually suspended during the post-1942 war years, because of repression and communal dissensions.³⁶ The Government contained the August

34. *IAR* (Jan-June 1943), Vol. 1, pp. 242-3.

35. Dutt, n. 29, pp. 99-102.

"1087 Kamrup, 29-4-44—It is reported that the Head Office of the Assam Congress Socialist Party has been started at Nowgong with the following workers:—(1) Deba Kanta Barooah, (2) Lakshmi Goswami, (3) Ghana-kanta Hazarika and (4) Tilak Hazarika.

This Party is being supported by Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua and Hemchandra Baruah. Lakhyadhar Barua (Chaudhuri? A. G.) is the treasurer of this party and he used to get money from Achyut Patwawardhan of United Provinces. Absconder Sankarchandra Barua is the leader of this party throughout Assam Valley...".—Extract from the Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence No. 19 dated 6 May 1944, Police Dept., Special Branch, File No. B. 2 (12) (a) 44/111, Shillong.

Shriman Prafulla Goswami, a Congressman close to the communists, had no links or rapport with this group.

36. *The Golden Jubilee Volume, Cotton College*, n. 16, pp. 56-58 and 65.

movement through repressive measures like the preventive detention of political leaders and suspects. There were 227 security prisoners in the Assam jails on 15 March 1943; 349 on 1 November 1943 and 162 on 31 October 1944. During the whole period from 9 August 1942 to 31 October 1944, altogether 463 persons had been held as security prisoners.³⁷

The August uprisings were ideologically confronted by the CPI. It argued that the USSR, the vanguard of the international working-class movement, being under attack since 22 June 1941, the imperialist war had turned into a peoples' war. The task before the Indian people, therefore, was not to impede war efforts through an open revolt against an ally of the USSR. The party had taken six months since 22 June to rectify its erstwhile anti-war stand and accept the new line towards the end of December 1941. In recognition of the change in its attitude, the ban on the party was lifted in July 1942. Biresh Misra, a leader of the Sylhet District Congress Committee (and also a communist), who was in jail since 1940, was released in time for participation in the first legal meeting of the CPI at Sylhet on 27 July 1942.³⁸ Communists of both the Valleys came out of their CSP shell. Early in 1943, the Assam Valley District Committee of the CPI was formed. By the end of the year, the two valley committees merged to form a provincial organising committee.

The new CPI line was first pushed among the students through the platform of the Assam *Chhatra Sanmilan* (Students' Federation). With some difficulties and despite an organisational split in May 1942, it continued to retain substantial influence over the student community.³⁹ Communists held key offices in the District Congress Committees of Sylhet and Cachar and were thus able to keep these committees somewhat in restraint in course of the August turmoil. Hitler's invasion of the USSR, and the threat of a Japanese invasion of India within a few months thereafter, brought no doubt a significant, if not radical change in the war situation and its character

37. *IAR* (Jan-June, 1943), Vol. 1, p. 243; *Assam Tribune*, 24 Nov. 1944; Saadulla to Bardoloi, Shillong, 2 August 1945, *APCC papers*, File on leaders' correspondence, Packet-43, n. 7.

38. *People's War*, 6 Sept. 1942.

39. In fact, the All-India Students' Federation was already split into two rival bodies in 1940. In Assam, one was represented by the CPI-led Assam Chhatra Sanmilan and the other by the RCPI-led Assam Provincial Students' Federation. A third body emerged in Assam, after the aforesaid split of 1942, in due course to accommodate Congress-minded students,

off famine in 1943. A class of contractors, traders and corrupt Government servants minted money. Communists, charged of collaboration with imperialism, used the opportunity to prove their *bona fide* by organising relief work and a protest movement directed against hoarders, profiteers and black-marketeers.⁴⁴

In the absence of the Congress leaders in the field, the CPI was able to build up a band of dedicated cadres, in both the Valleys, despite its unpopular stand on the war. In May 1943 its two Valley-wise district committees merged to form a provincial organising committee. Under its guidance, a campaign for the release of national leaders and for the Congress-League unity to achieve a national government was carried on. On 26 January 1944 Bardoloi was prematurely released on health grounds, but his movements were put under restriction. In a discussion with CPI leaders, Bardoloi agreed that the release of national leaders, the formation of a provisional Government on the basis of the Congress-League unity and an organised defence against the Japanese aggression—all these were the key tasks before the people. He even issued a well-publicised statement to that effect.⁴⁵

In course of a similar statement in April 1944, B.K. Das, Speaker and a Surma Valley Congress leader, said :

“Our country today is face to face with a threat from the Japanese aggressors. This is the moment when we should forget our narrow squabbles and petty interests and devote ourselves to the supreme task of defending our homes...”⁴⁶

The Congress legislators, who were then outside the prison bars, were eager to resume their normal parliamentary activities. One

44. Prafulla Misra, “Communist movement in Assam”, *Northeastern Affairs*, 1 (July-Sept., 1972), p. 30. *People's War*, 14 March 1943.

To maintain its patriotic image, the CPI refused to cooperate with the National War Front and tried to forge unity with Congressmen and leaguers for peaceful agitation on matters of public concern. Although its condemnation of Bose's supporters as fascists and fifth columnists was rejected by the people in general, it nevertheless was able to recruit quite a large number of young participants of the '42 movement to swell its ranks.

45. Misra, n. 44, p. 31; for the date of Bardoloi's release, *Assam Tribune*, 4 Feb. 1944; *People's War*, 28 May 1944; also Bhowani Sen's article in *People's War*, 2 July 1944.

It was suggested in the “APCC Report for 1945” (typed copy, pp. 1-15, in the *OEHFM*, Gauhati) that communists often publicised the views of Congress leaders in a distorted manner so as to suit their own point of view. Bardoloi's indulgent stand was that Congressmen, being non-violent, need not be shy of the communists.

46. *Assam Tribune*, 21 April 1944.

local consideration in particular weighed heavily in their minds. They wanted to halt the implementation of Saadulla's controversial land settlement and immigrant policy which had been revived since August 1943.

FOURTH SAADULLA MINISTRY UNDER PRESSURE

Resuscitated Land Development Scheme

The Bengal Legislative Council carried a motion on 16 July 1943, calling upon the Government of India to take immediate steps to remove all existing restrictions imposed by the Assam Government on the land-hungry, emigrant cultivators from Bengal. Exactly a year after its formation, the fourth Saadulla Ministry, therefore, adopted a new resolution on land settlement under the slogan of 'grow more food'. What it really meant, according to the Viceroy, was "grow more Moslems". The salient features of this resolution of 24 August 1943 were as follows:

- (i) resumed distribution of wastelands in proportion to needs of different communities in Nowgong and dereservation of select grazing reserves for that purpose, as per Resolution of 21 June 1940;
- (ii) dereservation of professional grazing reserves in Kamrup and Darrang, if found surplus to actual requirements; and
- (iii) opening up of surplus reserves in all the submontane areas, and in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, for settlement of landless indigenous people.⁴⁷

S. P. Desai, a senior ICS man, was appointed Special Officer to ascertain what portion of professional grazing reserves could be declared as surplus available for settlement. Desai reported that the forcible occupation of grazing lands by immigrants had already taken place to a large scale, even in the predominantly Assamese or tribal areas. His conclusion was that there was no surplus land available for new settlement.⁴⁸ Ignoring the report, Saadulla's Muslim

47. *Assam Tribune*, 3 Sept., 1943; also, *IAR* (July-Dec. 1943), Vol. 2, pp. 279-80, citing *Assam Gazette*, 25 August 1943. *Wavell the Viceroy's Journal*, n. 29, p. 41.

48. *Assam Tribune*, editorial, 27 Oct. 1944; Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided* (Bombay, 1946), p. 247; S. P. Desai, "My thirty five years in Assam", K. L. Punjabi, ed., *The Civil Servant in India* (Bombay, 1965), p. 66.

League Coalition Government threw select professional grazing reserves open for settling immigrants. The Revenue Secretary to the Government of Assam bluntly wrote to the Bengal Government in May 1944 that the gradual abolition of the Line system was a process that had already been under way "in areas where Caste Hindus are in a majority". It was a committed policy, he stated, "as far as is consistent with the necessity for reservation for indigenous people and protection of the tribal classes". The policy, thus elaborated, was claimed to have undergone considerable liberalisation in the recent past, to meet Bengal's objections.⁴⁹

This anti-Line policy gave an opportunity to the Assam *Jatiya Mahasabha* as well as the All-India Hindu Mahasabha to raise the respective cries of the Assamese and Hindus being in danger. They pointed out that the new resolution was nothing but a resuscitation of the discarded Land Development Scheme under a new garb.⁵⁰ On the other hand, nothing short of the abolition of the Line would satisfy the land-hungry Bengali Muslim immigrants and their leader, Bhasani, the president of the provincial Muslim League.

The provincial Muslim League conference was held in April 1944, with Chowdhry Khaliquzzaman in the chair, at Barpeta—Bhasani's stronghold. "Ministers give us land or resign" were literally the writings on the walls of the pandal to greet Saadulla. Replying to Bhasani's long harangue, Saadulla charged that the greedy headmen of immigrant villages, *dewanis* and *matbars*, had unceremoniously managed to get for themselves *pattas* for seventy to hundred acres of land each, with a view to induct sub-tenants thereupon. It was their greed which was at the root of the evil of the Line system. He cited instances of their driving out even Assamese Muslims from newly-reclaimed lands. To drive the point home, he drew a parallel with unrestricted Jewish migration to the Arab homeland. He pleaded for protection of Assam's tribals in the plains from the onslaught of more enterprising settlers. Finally, he appealed for support to his policy, since the Line system had already been relaxed a great deal with a view to its gradual abolition.⁵¹

The debate was carried on before an assembly of some twenty five thousand people. Bhasani, of course, won the day. The Ministry was

49. A. G. Patton to Revenue Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, Shillong 5 May 1944, Revenue Dept. Development Branch, File No. RD 25/44. (AS).

50. *JAR* (July-Dec. 1943), Vol. 2, pp. 258 and 279-80; *Assam Tribune*, 31 March 1944; *ibid*, 1 Sept., 1944.

51. *Assam Tribune*, 5 May 1944.

thus confronted with a deep political crisis. Despite an enquiry ordered by the all-India Muslim League's Working Committee, the quarrel between Bhasani and Saadulla remained unresolved.⁵²

Congress Assembly Party And Land Settlement Question

The Congress Assembly party had officially absented itself from the Assam Legislative Assembly for about three years, though three or four of its members did attend some sessions on their own individual capacity.⁵³

On the publication of Rajagopalachari's partition formula of 10 July 1944, Bardoloi became apprehensive of further Congress concessions to the League that might result in Assam's inclusion in the so-called East Pakistan. He wrote to Rajagopalachari that, if the province or any of its parts excepting Sylhet were grouped with Bengal to form a single unit under the formula, "the whole Province will join to a man opposing it". Forwarding a copy of this letter to Tej Bahadur Sapru on 14 August, Bardoloi requested him "to take a special interest in the matter and kindly to see that no injustice is done to Assam".⁵⁴ Bardoloi apprised also Gandhiji of Saadulla's anti-national policy and asked for his advice. If the people really felt that the Government's policy was oppressive and anti-national, let them fight it non-violently or violently, if necessary, was what Gandhiji advised in course of a message.⁵⁵

In September 1944 the Assam Government was considering further relaxation of restrictions on the movement of the released Congress legislators, so that they could attend the Assembly sessions. The Chief Secretary was in favour of relaxing the internment order on Bardoloi in particular, but both the Governor and the Chief Minister

52. Mohammad Walliullah, *Yugabicitra* (In Bengali, Dacca, 1967), pp. 420-A. According to a police report, altogether about one lac people were believed to have attended the conference. Town D. I. B. to Supdt. of Police, 13 Feb. 1945, Confidential B 1945, File C 27/45, (AS).

53. On 11 March 1943, four Congress party members were present in the House. *IAR* (Jan.-June 1943), Vol. I, p. 243.

54. Bardoloi's letter to Sapru, 14 August 1944 and a copy of his letter to Rajagopalachari, intercepted by CID, Special Branch, Lucknow in "Govt. notes regarding Bardoloi's intention to attend Assembly session at Shillong in Nov. 1944". Confidential B 1945, File No. C 241/1945, (AS).

55. This was what Bardoloi told the United Press of India in Dec. 1944. Congress decision to attend the Assembly session to protest against the anti-national policy was claimed to have stemmed from Gandhiji's advice. Later, in clarification, Bardoloi issued a statement that what Gandhiji had said four months ago was in consonance of his general attitude to cowardice. *Assam Tribune*, 22 Dec. 1944 and also 5 Jan. 1945. See *Hindustan Standard* (cal), 15, Dec. 1944.

were against it. Finally after some consultation, it was decided that all the interned legislators, Bardoloi not excepted, should apply for the Government's permission to attend the Assembly, and each case would be judged according to the concerned district magistrate's report. Those who were outside the jails asked for the permission and, except Purnachandra Sharma and A. K. Chanda, all of them had it. Out of thirty one members of the Congress Assembly party, only sixteen could attend the November session.⁵⁶

Back to the Assembly as the Opposition leader, Bardoloi declared on 14 November that his party's outlook as regards parliamentary activities remained unchanged. It would continue to take advantage of its position in the House to prevent the harm that was being done to the people. He demanded a shift in the land settlement policy in favour of the landless indigenous people and the pre-1938 immigrants.⁵⁷

The Opposition suggested that the land settlement question be considered once more by an all-party conference. The Governor, too, threw a similar hint in his address to the Assembly. Saadulla accepted the offer, without holding any prior consultation with the Muslim League party. An all-party conference was duly held under his chairmanship on 16-19 December 1944 to recommend a suitable land settlement policy. He chose not to stand by the rigid Muslim League policy on this issue and agreed, in essence, to whatever was suggested by the Congress party. Reservation of thirty per cent of the available wastelands as provision for the future expansion of the indigenous people, a planned settlement of the residual wastelands with the landless sons of the soil and the pre-1938 immigrants and a system of protection to tribal people in belts specially reserved for them—these were the measures recommended by the conference. Besides, it was also agreed that the integrity of grazing reserves should be strictly maintained and all trespassers evicted.

56. "Govt. notes regarding Bardoloi's intention to attend Assembly...", n. 54. Saadulla noted on 12 Sept., 1944: "When I find that this class of people who publicly speak of unity but secretly write to Gandhiji and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru against the same move as in Mr. Bardoloi's case, no reliance can be placed on their word".—*ibid.*
Also "The APCC Report for 1945" (typed copy, pp. 1-15), in the *OEHF*, Gauhati.

57. *Assam Tribune*, 24 Nov. 1944.
The Congress Assembly party took part only in the land settlement and procurement policy debates. "The APCC Report for 1945", n. 56, notes that, according to many, the retention of Assembly seats by Congress did harm to the province, and that this should be brought to the notice of Gandhiji.

The decisions, of course, were not unanimous. Two Muslim League participants, both of them immigrants, dissented.⁵⁸ Apparently, the outcome of the conference was a victory for the Congress. But soon it came out that there was many a slip indeed between the cup and the lip.

Government Resolution : 16 January 1945

In response to the conference decisions, the Government adopted a fresh resolution on wastelands settlement on 16 January 1945.

This resolution envisaged a plan for wastelands settlement in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong with the landless people of all categories, including the pre-1938 immigrants. Subject to availability, land was to be allotted to members of various communities in separate community-wise blocks, in accordance with their requirements. The ceiling of such allotment was fixed at 30 bighas (10 acres) per family. If enough land was not available in the aforementioned four districts for settling the landless, North-Lakhimpur subdivision was also to be opened up. A landless person was defined as one who owned less than five bighas of agricultural land. Tribal belts were to be constituted, and the total area required for the tribal people was to be calculated at double the area already in their possession plus a reservation for their future progeny on a basis similar to that for non-tribals. Altogether, thirty per cent of all cultivable wastelands in each district, as of 1940, was to be reserved to provide for future population growth. Lands in Professional Grazing Reserves, even if surplus, were henceforth to remain untouched, except where these had already been settled. If any community failed to fully occupy its quota of the allocated wastelands within two years, the unoccupied plots were to be allotted afresh to members from other communities.⁵⁹

The Ministerial Crisis Matures

As expected, the resolution was not acceptable to the immigrant Muslims. A meeting of the Assam Provincial Muslim League Council, held at Gauhati under Bhasani's chairmanship on 28 January,

58. *Assam Tribune*, 22 Dec. 1944; *ibid.*, 29 Dec. 1944; *ibid.*, 29 June 1945; Rajendra Prasad, n. 48, p. 248; *People's War*, 24 Dec. 1944.

In the negotiations, Saadulla had always the advantage of pointing out that, under the existing law of the land, the Government of Assam had no right to discriminate between communities in the matter of restricting freedom of movement and property rights. Strictly speaking, the Line had no legal basis.

59. *Assam Tribune*, 26 Jan. 1945.

and attended by 525 representatives, demanded total abolition of the Line system.⁶⁰

Even the Assamese public opinion was adverse to the resolution, because of a number of built-in loopholes. Most of the indigenous cultivators owned uneconomic holdings consisting of more than five bighas of land. Hence they could not claim themselves to be landless under the prescribed conditions; the five-bigha clause operated as a handicap for them. Secondly, since tribal belts had yet to be delimited, much room was still left for administrative manipulation and bungling. Contrary to the conference decisions, the resolution allowed wide discretionary powers to the local officers "to keep in possession encroachers who had been in occupation of and cultivating land in the grazing reserves over three years". This meant that even the post-1937 immigrants could get land if they were already in illegal occupation of plots in the grazing reserves. The Congress therefore refused to back the resolution.⁶¹

Because of this rejection of the land policy both by the Congress and the League, the Saadulla Ministry became shaky. By the end of January 1945 the press began to talk about a coming Saadulla-Chaudhuri Coalition Ministry, as an emerging alternative to Section 93.⁶² On 6 February the armed police intervened in a clash between the local graziers and the Bengali Muslim encroachers in the Kawaimari Grazing Reserve of Barpeta subdivision. Two of the latter group were injured from gunshots. This was followed by communal tension in the district. Due to administrative interference from above, the local police failed to take any effective action against the illegal encroachments, much to the resentment of the Assamese population.⁶³

60. Ibid, 9 Feb. 1945. On 14 Nov. 1942, Bhasani charged Abdul Matin Chaudhuri, a Muslim League minister, of betraying the immigrants. "Whoever goes to Lanka, becomes a Ravan" was what he said bitterly on the Assembly floor. *ALAP* (1942), p. 79.

61. Rajendra Prasad, n. 48, p. 248; Bardoloi's letter to Gandhiji, 14 March 1945, reproduced in *Gandhiji*, n. 9, pp. 139-41.

62. *Assam Tribune*, 2 Feb. 1945.

63. Confidential B 1945, File No.—C 27/45 (AS). A hue and cry was raised by the Muslim League press over the Kawaimari shooting incident. Two League ministers held spot enquiries on 12 February 1945, Saadulla noted on the file on 20 Feb. 1945 :

"The entire Police officers in the Barpeta circle are Hindus, and the immigrants have reported to me various things against Hindu officers of Police". Saadulla concluded that he had "never come across so blatant and outrageous Police report".

No surprise that Saadulla ordered transfer of the Police Inspector pending further enquiry.

'Sleeping Dogs of the Same Kennel'

That Chaudhuri would try to fish in the troubled waters was understandable. A trusted colleague though for years until his crossing the floor in December 1941, he was since kept out of Saadulla's fourth cabinet. Nevertheless the latter told the lower House:⁶⁴

"... Chaudhuri may be the leader of the Opposition today but we were sleeping dogs of the same kennel. Although there have been instances of species changing their genus or there have been biological freaks where the gender was changed, but my separation with him is so recent that he has no time to change..."

What was not easily understood was Bardoloi's role at this stage. With a special Government permission and together with eighteen Congress legislators, he attended the Assembly session that commenced on 1 March 1945. Evidently, being afraid of a defeat and eventual resignation, Saadulla was by this time in search of fresh allies. A hairbreadth escape on a cut motion on 17 March forced him to enter into secret negotiations with Chaudhuri and Bardoloi.⁶⁵

Bardoloi had come to the conclusion that, in the given situation, the Congress Assembly party had only two alternative courses opened to it. One was to launch a mass struggle against the unpopular Muslim League Coalition Government. But such a course involved the risk of raking up communal feelings and violence. The other one, i.e., to participate in the legislature and try to pull the Government down, was therefore, the only workable line of action left. However, since tribal and scheduled castes politicians would not welcome Section 93, a no-confidence moved by the Congress would fall flat unless the formation of an alternative coalition Government was also kept in view. Three possibilities, therefore, emerged:

- (i) a Congress-supported coalition ministry, without Saadulla, in which Congressmen would not accept any office, or
- (ii) a coalition ministry headed by Saadulla that would include Congressmen and would be committed to a minimum programme, or
- (iii) a full-fledged Congress Coalition Ministry.⁶⁶

64. 14 Nov., *ALAP* (1942), p. 92.

65. *Karagarar Cithi*, n. 17, p. 349; *People's War*, 8 April 1945.

66. The strategy as elaborated in Bardoloi's letter to Gandhiji, 14 March 1945, *Gandhiji*, n. 9, pp. 139-41.

The Congress Assembly party met to decide upon the strategy. Bardoloi told his colleagues that personally he was opposed to Congressmen serving on any cabinet, in the given situation. But as a democratic leader, he was prepared to act according to the Assembly Congress party's mandate. Excepting two, all his colleagues would go to any length to bring down the Muslim League Coalition Government. So the path for him was clear. He only felt he needed the moral sanction of Gandhiji for his coming action. In a long letter dated 14 March 1945, Bardoloi graphically described Assam's burning land settlement and the immigrant question. He explained the rationale of his strategy to oust, or at least curb, the Muslim League's power and concluded:

"... If I am continuing as a parliamentarian, it is only because there is no alternative for me just at present, and that I would do all that is possible for me to do not to become a minister consistent of course only with the safety of my province.

... I have made up my mind for the action on the understanding that I have your approval".⁶⁷

Gandhiji's reply to this letter was non-committal. "Do what is best. Kill corruption. Adopt that alternative", he wrote on 17 March "which is the best under the circumstances".⁶⁸ Apparently without waiting for the reply, Bardoloi had set at work. On 18 March he and Chaudhuri jointly sent a concrete five-point proposal to Saadulla inviting him to head a Congress-supported reconstituted ministry. The very next day Saadulla's Coalition party agreed by more than two-thirds majority to accept the proposal to form a stable ministry. They authorised their leader to negotiate the details, particularly about the land settlement policy and the allocation of cabinet seats.⁶⁹

The Tripartite Agreement

On 20 March the three leaders met together to thrash out the issues. The five points they agreed upon after three days' discussion were the following:

67. Ibid.

68. Cited in *IAR* (Jan-June 1945), Vol. 1, p. 214.

69. Chaudhuri and Bardoloi to Saadulla, Shillong, 19 March 1945 and Saadulla's reply to Chaudhuri and Bardoloi, Shillong, 19 March 1945. See *APCC papers*, Packet No. 43—"leaders correspondence", n. 7.

- (i) the restoration of civil liberties and the gradual release of political prisoners;
- (ii) a suitable policy for procurement and distribution of essential goods, with a view to remove corruption;
- (iii) a revision of the land settlement policy with a view to accommodate claims of the sons of the soil;
- (iv) an agreed distribution of local board seats among the main contending groups; and
- (v) the reconstitution of the Saadulla Ministry on an all-party basis.

FIFTH SAADULLA MINISTRY : 'A NEW ERA' ?

According to the agreement, Saadulla resigned on 23 March and reconstituted his cabinet to include all the five Muslim ministers from his last cabinet, one tribal minister chosen by the tribal group and four non-Muslim ministers, including one representative of the scheduled castes, selected by the Opposition, i.e., Congress.⁷⁰

Bardoloi and Tayyebulla At Logger-Heads

Although all the five Muslim League ministers were retained in the cabinet, the two important portfolios of land revenue and finance were taken out of their hands. All the non-Muslim ministers were practically Congress nominees, although Congressmen themselves did not accept any office. The Congress achieved what it wanted. Relieved and relaxed after the Assembly show was over, Bardoloi wrote to Gandhiji on 25 March: "In whatever has happened, I felt the hand of God and your good wishes and blessings working through them".⁷¹ In course of a press statement, Bardoloi even said that "a new era in Assam" had been ushered in. It was noted by the *Assam Tribune* that "the Congress and the Moslem League have joined hands in Assam".⁷² The Provincial Congress Constructive Workers' meeting held at Goalpara on 27 March, with the participation of

70. *IAR* (Jan-June 1945), Vol. 1, p. 213; *Karagarar Cithi*, n. 17, pp. 351-5; *Tayyebulla*, n. 6, p. 158.

Also see in this connection Bardoloi's letter to Gandhiji, 14 March 1945, n. 61 and speeches by Saadulla and Bardoloi, 22 March, *ALAP* (1945), pp. 780-2.

71. *APCC Papers*, Packet No. 43—"leaders correspondence", n. 7, *IAR* (Jan-June 1945), Vol. 1, p. 213.

72. *Assam Tribune*, 30 March 1945.

Bardoloi, Hemchandra Baruah and other leaders, was a clear sign of renewed Congress initiative in public activities.⁷³

All were not happy. Not certainly Tayyebulla, who claimed to be no less a Gandhian than Bardoloi. Released on 27 March, he issued a press statement in his capacity as the APCC president, expressing strong opposition to the tripartite agreement. Bardoloi had no right to use the name of the Congress, he said, in signing an agreement with the war collaborators like Saadulla and Chaudhuri. In June he sent a memorandum to the Congress high command and asked it to discuss the matter in the next meeting of the Working Committee. But the Congress-League *entente* in the Assam Legislative Assembly was already showing signs of a total breakdown. Under the changed circumstances, the Congress high command was not in a mood to discipline Bardoloi for his non-conformist role in ministry-making. The controversy within the APCC on this issue became pointless with the end of World War II by early August 1945 and with new developments in the province.⁷⁴

Burial of the Tripartite Agreement

Ministry-making with the personnel acceptable to everybody was rather an easy task, as compared to the fulfilment of the remaining part of the Saadulla-Chaudhuri-Bardoloi Agreement. Particularly, the revision of the resolution of 16 January 1945 needed a careful handling. The working committee of the CPI-controlled Assam Provincial *Kisan Sabha*, meeting on 30 May at Gauhati, appealed to all the concerned political parties for a compromise on this controversial issue. On the one hand, it recognised the prior right of the Assamese people to the local soil and on the other, it also supported the demand of landless Bengali peasants for settlement on Assam's surplus wastelands after a proper survey.⁷⁵

Due to intricacies of the situation and various obstacles put forward by the League, the cabinet dared not adopt a new resolution on the subject until 18 June. Even this was not published until 13 July 1945. Thus, it was about four months after the signing of the agreement that the new land settlement policy was officially announced. A landless family was now re-defined as one possessing less than

73. *People's War*, 8 April 1945.

74. Tayyebulla, n. 6, pp. 158-60.

75. Birish Misra's despatch in *People's War*, 15 July 1945 and *Assam Tribune*, 8 June 1945.

twenty bighas of land. All grazing reserves were to be maintained intact and all encroachers were to be indiscriminately evicted therefrom, as a matter of policy. In short, the principles agreed upon in the December Conference were, in all respects, fully restored.⁷⁶

The new Government's halting and half-hearted action in fully implementing the agreement provided Bardoloi with a plea to wriggle out of the unwise marriage of convenience—an arrangement already under heavy fire from his critics in the APCC. On 10 July 1945, he wrote to Abul Kalam Azad, the national Congress president, giving him a detailed report of the Assam situation. He also privately wrote to Saadulla on 13 July, charging him of deliberate procrastination in implementing the agreement in toto. The contents of the last-mentioned letter leaked out to the press. Out of station, Saadulla presumably received it only after his return from Simla on 19 July. Rajendra Prasad wrote on 21 July to the APCC president, Tayyebulla, that his complaint about the unprincipled tripartite deal must be receiving Azad's attention and that it might be taken up in the next Working Committee meeting. Azad advised Bardoloi to carry on the negotiations with Saadulla and allow the latter a few weeks' time so that "our attitude may remain straight-forward and unambiguous" until the Congress Working Committee decided on the next step.⁷⁷

If Bardoloi was working under constraints from above, so was Saadulla. The Central Parliamentary Board of the Muslim League had frowned upon the resolution of 18 June and advised for its modification. Accordingly on 28 July Saadulla apprised R. K. Chaudhuri, the Land Revenue Minister, of the suggested modifications. The crux of the proposed amendment was that such immigrants as had already sown at least one crop should be entitled to land settlement, irrespective of their arrival dates in the Brahmaputra Valley or of the legality of their squatting on grazing reserves. Chaudhuri handed over this letter of 28 July to the APCC leaders.⁷⁸

76. *Assam Tribune*, 27 July 1945.

77. For reference to Rajendra Prasad, see Tayyebulla, n. 17, p. 366. Azad to Bardoloi, 22 July 1945 and Bardoloi to Saadulla, 21 August 1945, in the File containing "leaders correspondence" *APCC papers*—packet No. 43, n. 7.

78. Saadulla to Chaudhuri, 28 July 1945, *ibid.*

The rift between Saadulla and Bhasani over the land settlement issue had divided the provincial League into two warring factions in 1945. Two all-India League leaders—Chowdhry Khaliquzzaman and Liaquat Ali came to Shillong in mid-May 1945 to patch up the quarrel. But it was never patched up. Bhasani worked up sentiments over the eviction question and cornered Saadulla.—*People's War*, 15 July 1945.